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Aide-de-Camp's Library

There are deserted towns in France, small fortified places overhanging remote valleys, whose life ceased long ago and whose people went elsewhere to seek their livelihood. Peter de Mendelssohn has made a new legend in the spirit of the old legends surrounding one of these fortress towns cut off from the world when a river changed its course. Descendants of its original inhabitants return to settle there. They build a bridge over the river, and others come. No one is turned away. The little town comes to life again, the property of them all.

But if it is now repopulated by the people of to-day, it has never really ceased to be populated by the generation of yesterday. Ghosts walk its streets and inhabit its crumbled houses. History lies heavily upon it. The new life, with all its hopes and loves, is caught up inevitably in the old story, in the past dreams of pursuit of happiness and the will to destruction. Finally, an ancient battle is re-fought, the pilgrims go back whence they came, and the town becomes deserted once again.

The theme of the working of ghosts of the past upon people of the present is one whose fascination never fades, and Peter de Mendelssohn here invests it with rare imagination and a singular and touching beauty.

By the same Author

novels

ALL THAT MATTERS
ACROSS THE DARK RIVER

political

JAPAN'S POLITICAL WARFARE

PETER DE MENDELSSOHN

The Hours
and
The Centuries

a tale

L o n d o n

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

First published in England 1944
Reprinted, 1945

copyright in U.S.A. under the
title *Fortress in the Skies*.



*This book is produced in
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Printed in Great Britain by
WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES
for JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD.
8, Bury Place, London, W.C.1

We die with the dying :
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead :
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

T. S. ELIOT, *Little Gidding*

■

to the memory of my brother
THOMAS
lover of fancies and fables
this tale is dedicated

■

I

AT THE TIME when Rousset Barthélemy returned from the lower valley to the ancient city of Roquefort where his forefathers had lived, the River Varouse had already changed its course. The rock still stood, dark and tall, at the entrance to the gorge. Erect like a giant thumb, lifted from the palm of the earth, it still guarded the way into the country of Vargelonnes. But the river was on the wrong side.

Rousset wondered what had come about. He never learned. No one had lived at Roquefort since the time his grandfather, and with him the last inhabitants, had gone away. No one had witnessed the great spectacle. This was a lost and lonely land.

He, Rousset, had not been to this country before. But his mind knew it well. It had held it for many years of his youth and manhood and had not lost a single tree or hedge, a single farmhouse on the way, a single turning of the road. The road wound its great leisurely way, for five long days, from the coast upwards across the hills and valleys until it reached the high mountain range. Rousset had wandered the whole of the five days.

Before noon on the fifth day he had passed through St. Saturnin des Vignes. It was the last inhabited village on his way. A little later he had seen a man cutting reeds far away by a lonely brook, and this man was the last living being he had seen. After that he had met no more people, except a dead man with a tattered straw hat. He was hanging on a piece of rope from the low branch of an apple tree by the road. Life had gone away from the apple tree too, from the field in which it stood, from the land that lay all around it. The road wound its way through the hills, and in the early afternoon he saw La Chadourne in the valley below, still and dead.

For a moment Rousset Barthélemy stood still and listened. The land lay in silence; the village had died. No dog barked in its deserted farmyards; not a wisp of smoke rose from its tumbled chimneys. He turned and looked back towards St. Saturnin, where only a few hours ago the smell of fresh bread had wafted past him from the dark doorway of a bakehouse. But the village was out of sight. Rousset nodded

it a last farewell. His heart filled with the stillness of his daydream, he resumed the road down which his forefathers had come on their exodus. As he walked upwards towards the crest of the next range they came down towards him on their way to the valley. Rousset was not surprised to meet them, and he looked at them closely as they approached.

He saw his grandfather, tall, gaunt in his seventy-fourth year, his slashed face shaded against the sun by his high, broad-rimmed black shepherd's hat, his blue blouse fluttering in the summer wind. He recognized his grandfather's sons and daughters, their wives and husbands, silent, angry men and women who walked beside their horses and amid their dogs and cattle, their eyes fastened to the sloping road and unwilling to glance ahead, their restless hands fingering the bridles. Thus they came towards him, a silent column, soundless but for the soft groaning of the wheels of their high-piled carts, voiceless but for one voice that sang softly and clearly amid the humming stillness of midday. He knew it was his young mother's voice. He glanced at her whom he had never known, as she passed him, leading her two young sisters by their hands, and he recognized her face: her eyes dark green and cool like the forest she came from, her hair brown as the bark of the pine tree and smelling faintly of resin, her singing lips as she walked beside his grandfather. He halted to let her pass with the rest of them. The song wafted by him, one fragment, another, and was gone. He turned and walked on, into the deadness that trailed behind them.

The road before him was empty. It had become rough and narrow, overgrown and full of stones. The ruts of the last cartwheel, the footprints of the last man and ass who had trodden it had long ago been effaced. Time now strode on with outstretched arms across the hills and valleys, swelling the rivers, raising the crops, deadening the vineyards, crumpling the house and the stable that man and his daughters had built. The ashes under the overturned hearthstones are dead, but new fires are being kindled in the next valley. On the ridge of the hill the years pass each other as they come and go, and the hours walk no faster than the centuries. Rousset walked on.

Bluebells, pale and exhausted, now stood at the wayside in disconsolate groups, and a patch of poppies, like a blazing-red scarf flung

into a meadow, lay below his feet. He halted again. Ollioure, the hamlet of four roofs where his grandmother had been born, its remnants white and sun-bleached, was crumbling away in its cluster of old, barren olive trees. But ahead of him he now saw the broad silver ribbon of the Varouse. At dusk he reached the end of the road.

He was a small boy and he stood between the knees of his grandfather, who was sitting in a wicker chair on the porch and held his little hands between his own big knotty hands, and his voice that was almost dead said from under the shade of the tall shepherd's hat: 'Remember. Where the road ends stands the rock. Crowned by the dark and lifeless city, it rises before your eyes, tall and inaccessible, and behind it rise the mountains, the endless woods, the gorges and ravines, the wild, unknown plateau of Vargelonnes. To find your way up, look for the river. It is a narrow but thundering stream which comes down from the plateau and bursts forth from the deeply cut gorge into the valley to the rock's left. It washes the rock's feet in a hurling swirl, then bends to the right, and where it begins to quieten, to broaden, two cypresses stand. Below them the river makes off, tramping away, trudging and marching like a big beast on big feet, ever widening towards the lowlands and the coast.

'Between the cypresses is the bridge. You cross it, and beyond you find your road again. It is a mere path now, strewn thickly with pebbles, perched close to the side of the rock. If you have your ass with you, lead her cautiously. Ascend. Keep following the path, and it takes you to the back of the rock. Here is the entrance into the city. The back of the rock is bent. Walk up the street which is called La Bourgade between the houses that walk up with you on either side. You reach the top; you look down from the parapet. The rock and the city are like the bow of a mighty ship stranded at the edge of the great woods, rearing her head towards the distant, invisible sea. Remember well, because one day you will go, and when you have arrived you will be happy to have come.'

Could it be that he had remembered it all wrong?

The rock stood where it should. But the river did not come down from the left. That side lay dry. There was no water, but brushwood, stones, and boulders. The river came down on the right. There was no bridge, no two cypresses. They had gone, perhaps many years

before with the traces of man. There was no path to climb. The river had swallowed it, as it had swallowed the bridge and the trees of his memory. It now emerged from behind the back of the rock. A great unknown hand had gripped it as it broke from the gorge and bent its neck and forced its whole body through the narrow space cut out between the rock and the face of the mountains. Now, appearing suddenly on the opposite side, it rushed down in tumult along where the path had been, released again, stumbling away among the reeds, panting, breathless, an escaped fugitive. Drunk with new-won freedom, it joined its old course again farther below and journeyed away towards the descending hills and out of sight.

Darkness fell. Rousset, at the edge of the water, gazed up. There was no light, no sound.

‘Ohé!’ he called out. ‘Ohé, Roquefort!’

There was no answer from the city. His voice dropped back from the naked stone, flat and without echo.

‘Ohé, Pucina,’ he spoke to his ass. ‘Let us mount.’

‘How did you get up here?’ asked the little man.

‘I walked up among the boulders in the dead river bed,’ answered Rousset Barthélemy. ‘I waded through the river and into the gorge. I passed along on the other side and then crossed back through the river. Then I walked up. It isn’t easy. There should be a bridge.’

‘And your ass?’

‘The same way.’

The little man was sitting on a three-legged stool in front of a dark house that faced the square. The square was much more spacious than Rousset had expected. It was ringed with the shadows of houses squatting shoulder to shoulder, silent and dead in the moonlight. The little man had a stable lantern standing beside his stool which cast a flickering yellow light over the cobblestones. He lifted it and held it into Rousset’s face.

‘Who told you to come here?’ he asked.

‘My grandfather,’ answered Rousset.

He saw that the man was very old. Wrinkles crossed his bearded face in all directions like a maze of dry furrows of earth overgrown with a creeping weed and its white fluffy flower. His hands, too, were

like the dry crust of the earth. The white flowering weed grew on the wrists, over the back of the hands, and along the fingers down to their tips. It grew from the nostrils of his small, beaklike nose. The man's eyes were deep-set and clear, like water.

'I don't know your grandfather,' he said gruffly. 'Or do I?'

'Naturally you don't. He's dead.'

'I know a good many dead people,' answered the little man. 'What was his name?'

'Barthélemy, Catulle.'

The old man nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know him. He lost his life in the great battle of Peira-Colonna.'

'No,' Rousset answered. 'He died sitting in his wicker chair in the porch of my father's house. His two brothers, my great-uncles, were killed. But he came away, with a deep cleft in his forehead.'

'He didn't,' the little man protested. 'All were slain, the King's men and the men of Jehan le Noir alike. Except his two sons who escaped.'

'Ah?' Rousset inquired.

'Yes,' the little man insisted. 'The castle of Peira-Colonna was reduced, and the body of Jehan le Noir was never found because it was buried under the rubble. His sons and their descendants, let me tell you, sank into dire poverty; they had to work for others in the fields and vineyards, and even then they were dull and vicious men. They found no wives and would have died out but for their bastards. Of them one or two may still be in the neighbourhood. Nothing has been heard of them lately.'

'I didn't know that story.'

'It's no story. It happened.'

'How long ago?'

'I forget. Four hundred years or so.'

'Then it isn't my grandfather's story,' Rousset said.

He sighed and brushed his hair from his brow. Then he took another good look at the man. He saw that he wore high brown boots and scarred, wrinkled leather trousers stuffed into the tops of his boots. His hands and boots and trousers looked as if they were all made of the same earthy, scarred leather. It seemed odd that the white fluffy weed should not grow on his knees and boots as well.

'Tell me, what happened to the river?' Rousset asked.

'The river,' answered the fluffy man, 'has locked the gate to the city. So that those who have stayed should stay and those who have gone should remain gone.'

'What about yourself?'

'I come and I go.'

He turned half round on his seat. The light from his lantern fell on the house in front of which he was sitting. It was a low house. Its roof had half fallen in. Its door stood open, but inside it was dark, and there was no glass in its two small windows.

'This is my house,' the little man said. 'I'm showing it to you for you to know. Can you read? I've written it above the porch. It says: "House of the Centurion."'

'Are you the Centurion?'

'I am.'

He put down his lamp and from his clear bird's eyes looked the tall man who stood before him straight in his face.

'Are you going to bring people here?'

'My own people.'

'How many?'

'Four. My wife. My two sons. My daughter.'

'That goes,' answered the Centurion.

He reached under his stool and produced a black belly-shaped bottle with a silver stopper. Rousset watched him unscrew it. It was of real silver, heavy and richly embossed and chiselled. The Centurion took a long gulp from the bottle and then handed it to Rousset.

'Salute!' he said with sudden gruff cheerfulness. 'And welcome!'

Rousset lifted the bottle to his lips. The wine flowed thick and oily from it, and it had a black and burning taste. It smelled of smoke, of leaves smouldering on the dry earth in the thin air of the high mountains. It tasted of ripe, juicy grapes smarting alive in fire, of the stalks of vines burning slowly, their brown skin dry and charred, their sap pressed out by the burning heat, sizzling, simmering, dripping boiling hot on to the dry earth, with the thin air and the smoke of the burning leaves drifting across the field and the cold, golden sweetness of the pale autumn sun mingling with it.

'Ah!' said Rousset. 'That——'

The black night wind swept across the square, dragging the moon-

light, the clouds from the sky in a hot, dancing swirl over the tops of the dead houses. The river, far below, roared thunderously through the night. Rousset, standing straight, his feet slightly apart, felt himself grow from second to second. His shoulders reached above the roofs of the houses; his head was high above them, higher now than the belfry of the citadel that looked out across the dark, cloud-swept land. Below him he heard the Centurion laugh.

He looked down. The Centurion had become very small indeed. Like a croaking frog, he sat between Rousset's feet and was no higher than his boots. Rousset felt his legs grow, his feet, his shoulders, his arms. His feet had rooted themselves deep in the rock. His outstretched arms reached far beyond the ramparts of the city. The clouds drifted across his face, past his eyes; he smelled their taste on his tongue and lips, and the moonlight stuck like a waxed coat to his cheeks and forehead. He was a giant towering above a dead world, with his feet grown into the rock.

'Almighty Lord!' he heard himself shout, and his voice was louder than the wind and the roar of the river.

'What do you see?' the Centurion called laughingly from below. 'What do you hear?'

'The vineyards on fire!' he answered. 'The grapes going up in flames! The clouds are wrapped round my face like a wet, steaming blanket. My arms are so long and my hands so far away that I can never pull them back. My ears are hearing things that are going on beyond the earth. And my eyes, my eyes! The wine is on fire, Jesus and Mary!'

Below the Centurion cackled with laughter.

'Give me the bottle!' he cried. 'Sit down!'

Rousset sat down. It was all over. The square lay in deep silence. Now and then an unfastened window, a door whose lock had broken years ago rattled and banged in the night wind. The Centurion sat on his stool, grinning.

'*Sacré*,' Rousset said. 'That wine of yours. That bottle.'

The Centurion nodded. Carefully he replaced the silver stopper.

'It's King Francis' bottle,' he said gravely. 'I found it in his house. He must have lost or forgotten it.'

'Where does he live?'

'Down the passage, behind the inn,' answered the Centurion. 'The house called La Goulette.'

'Is he still there?'

'He may be.'

'Let's go round and see him. Perhaps he feels lonely and would like a drink.'

The Centurion gave a start. He drew his upper lip slightly as if in a sniff. A shadow of sudden apprehension flickered across his face.

'No,' he said curtly. 'I remember now. He's no longer there.'

'Where's he gone?'

'He stayed for only three days and nights. It was to meet the Duke of Burgundy and Prince Grimaldi. They had a quarrel over this city. Prince Grimaldi came up the valley from Barcelonette with two hundred horse. I remember now. He didn't get the city. Later the King rode away, and afterwards died.'

He lifted his bearded chin and for a moment stared fixedly into Rousset's eyes.

'I'm going away in the morning,' he then said abruptly. 'Perhaps for a long time. Now while I'm away don't you and those sons of yours build a bridge. It will do no good. If you build a bridge, people will come. If people come, trouble comes. Strangers. Misfortune.'

'Who owns this place?' Rousset asked, suddenly irritated.

'I do,' answered the Centurion. 'I'm the Commandant of the Fortress. I'm the Captain of the Ship.'

'All right,' Rousset smiled. 'Where are you going?'

'Into the thick of the land.'

'As far as that?'

'Yes.' The Centurion nodded gravely. 'As far as that. Good night.'

He picked up his bottle, lifted his lamp, and rose. A moment later he had disappeared. The door of his house stood ajar, but no sound came from inside. Nor was there any light.

In the morning Rousset went to look for his grandfather's house. His memory said: The ancient city is not a big place, but it is easy to lose one's way in it. Watch out and mind your step. The houses are built into the rock; they rise from it; they sink back into it. They stand not only beside each other but also above and below and across

each other. The rock is the floor here, the roof, the back wall, the side wall there.

This is how you find your way. The flat top of the rock is like the palm of your hand held out flat. Look at it. On the farthest point, on the tip of your middle finger, sits the citadel. On the tip of your forefinger sits the church. On the tip of your fourth finger sits the inn. At the root of your thumb sits the house of the Centurion. Between them, around them, below them, along the edge of your palm sit the houses. Your grandfather's house stands four houses below the church. Look out. There is a cobbled passageway. An arch. A short flight of steps. And remember: beyond the finger tips is nothing. Hundreds of feet of jagged, steeply falling rock and space. Below lies the land.

The house for which he searched was no more. Its cellar had been hewn deep into the rock, but a piece had broken away and sent half the house crashing down the precipice. The rest, back wall and left side wall, still rose to half their former height from a mass of grey stone and rubble thickly overgrown with ivy. Rousset gazed at it dreamily. Over there, he reflected as his eyes wandered over the ruins, must have been the open fireplace. There the wooden bench, where at dusk my grandfather would sit and watch my grandmother cook the soup in the big iron pot hanging over the fire from a chain and a big hook. And his little son would be riding on his knees, and the flames from the hearth would be dancing on his flushed cheeks. Here must have been the window from which that small boy, my father, looked out into the sun-swept Land of the Hundred Hills, there the door and threshold over which one wintry afternoon he carried his young bride, my mother, the shantyman's daughter from the great woods, into the family circle. He shook his head. The house had gone. He smiled without regret. For below lay the land.

Leaning back against the ruined wall, his hand shielding his eyes against the dazzling morning sun, Rousset Barthélemy gazed out over its vast expanse. The land was rich. The Varouse, darting away from the flank of the rock, travelled broad and silvery across miles of idle pasture. Its banks were lined with birches, and the reeds and clover were coming up fat and rich on either side among them. Beyond stood the grey, dusty clusters of the olive groves among the high grass

of the hills and the terraces of the ancient vineyards, now brown and dead without leaf or stem or fruit. And the road, that endless road of ochre dust by which he had come, now winding away from him over the range of hills among the olive groves, down the next valley, away—it was good to see it from above, so long, so endless under the blue, cloudless sky.

The sun lay warm on Rousset's hair and neck and hands. A lizard rustled among the ivy between his feet and suddenly slipped out in front of his boot. It sat still, its green back green like the ivy it had sprung from, its breast the greyish yellow of the crumbled stone, its belly pumping. Salute, comrade, Rousset said with soft, happy laughter in his voice. Alive? Breathing? Having a look round? The lizard sat still.

Yes—alive, breathing, Rousset thought. The land, too, is alive and breathing. Look. Listen. The land is not dead. It is asleep. Chadourne, Ollioure, St. Crispin, Madone, Mas Mireil, they aren't dead. Deserted, left to their loneliness, they have sunk into deep slumber and forgotten how to wake again. In its sleep the land is full and rich. The woods are rich, the pastures, the fields, the vineyards, the streams and rivulets. They breathe. He watched the land in its sleep for many hours, until he felt he knew it in all its limbs and moulds. Its breast rose and sank tenderly, evenly, in its timeless, fruitful slumber as the warm wind bathed its dormant face. Rousset pushed his hat back from his forehead. The morning wind from the valley blew through his tousled black hair and drove little tears of excitement into the corners of his eyes.

'Ho!' he called out. 'The villages and hamlets! Madone! Ollioure! Chadourne! Ho!'

High up, from the broken ramparts of the old fortress, his voice rang out across the land in a long-swelling flourish, and his eyes were full of a great happy laughter as it came rolling back to him with the hundred voices of the wind.

In the autumn Rousset Barthélemy and his two sons built a wooden bridge across the River Varouse, between the back of the rock and the edge of the gorge. They were helped by a man named Joannon who had happened to pass. He was a woodcutter who,

during the summer, had worked in the forests up in Vargelottes and was now on his way to Terrerouge, a village two days away. There, he said, he knew some people with whom he meant to stay over the winter. He went to Terrerouge a little later, but it was only to have some heavy bolts made at the smithy. After a week he returned with them, and the blacksmith accompanied him. The blacksmith's name was Archambault. He was a small and stocky man, with a nose like a shrivelled carrot and a very loud voice. While they were building the bridge he told loudly and angrily how, for forty years, he had suffered nothing but grief, annoyance, and tribulation at the hands of his family and neighbours. Thus he had come to be a very worried old man.

'I told them,' he shouted through the clatter of the hammering and the rushing swirl of the river, 'I told them a hundred times: "One day I'm going to live, and to live alone and all by myself!"'

'Did they believe it?' the sons of Rousset Barthélemy shouted from the other side of the stream.

'No!' the blacksmith thundered back indignantly. 'I kept telling them: "One fine day you'll see me go away and not come back. That'll be a fine day for all of us." And they laughed!'

Joannon, the woodsman, said very little. He was a quiet man who even in his high shantyman's boots walked about on soundless feet and whose hands, supple and diligent, never seemed to produce the least noise, not even when doing heavy work. His eyes were the colour of holly, a strong and sombre dark green, and when they smiled a spark of gold, a starlike light, shone in them. He's like a lizard, that one, Rousset thought.

At noon they would stop working and look out for Renée, the Barthélemy daughter, to come down the Bourgade with their midday meal. The girl was eighteen, thin and lanky. In her black, dusty frock, a white scarf tied over her loose dark hair, she came sauntering down the steep street with pebbles tumbling along between her feet. She carried the food in two bulging canvas bags, and they kept swinging against her bare legs as she hopped along, down towards the river and the waiting men.

Archambault, resting his crossed forearms on the long handle of his forging hammer, his eyes half closed under the bushy brows and blinking lazily against the sun, watched her approach.

'Rousset,' he said, 'your girl, she reminds me of a bird.'

'Ah?' Rousset asked.

'Yes, a bird,' the blacksmith explained. 'It's the way she hops along. A kind of black bird on long thin legs.'

'You have some ideas. I must tell it to her mother, that one.'

'You don't get my meaning,' Archambault went on, unperturbed, still watching. 'It's a fact that each human being has an animal which it resembles. Now, myself, I resemble a wolf. An old and rather shabby wolf, admittedly, but a wolf. Your two boys, well, I've been thinking about them, and I believe they're dogs. You know, shaggy, fluffy-furred sheep dogs. The shantyman, he——'

'A lizard,' Rousset suggested.

'Very true,' the blacksmith agreed. 'I see you've got my meaning. And the girl's a bird.'

'Who's a bird?' asked Joannon.

He was standing almost waist-deep in the swirling stream. Now he was coming up to the rocky bank where the others sat waiting in the sun, plodding heavily against the rushing whirls, his face and bare upper body tanned and dripping wet and glistening in the sun.

'Eh,' Rousset called, 'while you're in there put the bottle in the water to cool.'

The girl handed the woodsman the bottle from the jutting piece of flat rock on which she stood, and he bent down and placed it in the shallow water between the moss-covered rocks.

'Won't the stream carry it away?' she asked.

'No,' he answered. 'It's quite safe.'

He pulled himself up and sat down on the flat stone in the sun, his naked legs in their rolled-up trousers dangling and dripping wet.

The girl opened the canvas bags and handed the parcels to her father, who spread the contents, several long loaves of bread, pâté, garlic sausage, cheese, on the flat stones. The men drew their pocket-knives and unclashed them. The two Barthélemy boys came up from farther down the stream. Joannon brought out a very large and curved knife with a buckhorn handle and carefully wiped its shimmering blade on his trousers. Rousset began to break the loaves into equal lengths.

'What have you got that big knife for?' the girl asked.

The woodsman raised his head and looked up where she stood behind him.

'To cut branches with,' he answered quietly, with a soft voice like running water. 'To make firewood, kill rabbits, all sorts of things.'

'Gaspard,' Rousset called to his elder son, 'get the bottle. It's cold enough now.'

'What else?' the girl asked.

'Nothing else,' the woodsman answered.

He smiled, and the golden spark shone in his dark green eyes.

'Rée,' Rousset said from under his wide black hat, without looking up, 'your mother's waiting for you.'

After she had gone the men sat eating in silence. The sun shone bright and hot on their backs and on the mossy riverbank and the swirling water and the half-finished bridge.

'Who's a bird?' Joannon then asked once more, chewing steadily.

When the bridge was completed late in September, neither of the two men seemed to think much of going back to Terrerouge.

'If it doesn't trouble you,' Joannon said to Rousset.

'It doesn't. Besides, I don't own the place.'

'I don't want to be in anybody's way.'

'You aren't,' answered Rousset. 'Find yourself a house. La Mère will cook for you. And for Archambault too.'

In the evening, after the soup, Rousset sat on his doorstep. He had his legs drawn up, his elbows resting on his knees. His bearded chin propped up in the palms of his big hands, he gazed down the Bourgade towards the bridge. The dead end of a half-smoked cigarette was stuck to his upper lip, and from time to time he would move it from one corner of his mouth to the other, without lighting it, and go on gazing. Small shadows of people came and went across the bridge in the blue evening haze. There were lights here and there in the windows and steps on the cobblestones.

La Mère stepped out behind him and slowly emptied a pail of dish-water into the square.

'You're content,' she said.

'Yes. This is going to be a good place. I knew it would be.'

His big hands went combing through his thick hair several times.

'What puzzles me is this: Why did they go away?'

'Archambault has a story.'

'I know. Every one has. No one knows. What happened?'

He stretched out his hands in front of him.

'Look,' he said. 'Already the land is feeding us, after one summer and so little work. There never was such soil as this on all God's earth. At the merest touch of your hand it awakens, stretches, and bursts into fruit. Why did they go away?'

'What I wonder about,' she said after a pause, 'is this: Where is one buried when one dies in this place? There is no cemetery.'

'No,' he answered. 'This is a fortress. You wouldn't think they buried their dead outside the city. Perhaps one doesn't die in this place; perhaps one lives for ever. Or——'

'Oh'—she laughed softly—'I'm going to die here all right. I'm not moving myself any more.'

He lifted his head and looked at her and smiled.

'What amuses you?'

'To think,' he said, 'that we could have been children here together, you and I. Our parents living across the square from each other. You would be six years old and I ten, eh? We would have played under the arcades by the church, in the dark corners among the wine barrels. We would have——'

He took the dead cigarette from his mouth and dropped it.

'Perhaps we did,' he said. 'I no longer really remember my life.'

He rose and picked up the empty pail.

'There. Let me get you some fresh water.'

2

A MAN, A woman, and a small boy were coming up the Bourgade. The man walked a few steps ahead in a solitary and independent manner, and the woman and the little boy seemed to have difficulty in keeping up with him. The woman was holding the boy by the

hand and with her free arm carried a large bundle pressed against her hip. The man was tall and carried a stick. He walked briskly up the steeply rising street while his eyes wandered keenly along the rows of dead houses on either side, and his steps resounded hollow on the cobbles of the rough, thickly overgrown pavement.

'Salute,' he said when he reached the square.

'Salute,' answered Rousset Barthélemy, who was sitting on his doorstep.

'Anybody about?'

'No. No one except us.'

Rousset pushed his hat back and blinked up. The stranger said no more but let his eyes wander over the square. The woman and the boy stood a little distance away by the fountain, in front of the church, waiting quietly and patiently. Presently the boy sat down on the stone step of the fountain, his legs drawn up and his face resting in his hands. His eyes half covered by a strand of unkempt fair hair, he stared with a glazed, exhausted look in front of him. His mother had put the bundle down and stood leaning her back against the fountain. The light began to fade. The church cast a long and slender shadow across the square, and only here and there a last fiery ray of copper sunlight shot over the roofs and vanished. The woman was young and the boy no more than six or seven years old. In the sinking light she, too, looked very tired, but there was a humble and quiet patience even in her tired silence. Rousset smiled at her and gave her a quick little nod.

'Are they your people?' he asked into the silence.

'Who?' The stranger turned round. 'They? No. I don't know them.'

'They came with you.'

'They must have followed me. It's true, this afternoon when I came up I saw them resting on a boulder at the foot of the rock. I passed them and afterwards thought no more about them.'

'Ah? I thought——'

With a slight movement of his head he beckoned them over to the house.

'Go inside—you two,' he called softly. 'Rest awhile inside.'

Her cheeks suddenly flushed with fatigue and embarrassment, the

young woman gave an obedient nod and gently roused the boy, who had fallen asleep.

The sound of a mouth organ now came from behind the church. A young man appeared in a faded red shirt with rolled-up sleeves and blue dungaree trousers and crossed the square.

'Salute, Fabri,' Rousset said, 'How goes?'

Fabri stopped playing and grinned.

'Salute,' he answered. 'It goes famously.'

He cast a quick glance at the newcomers and then, waving his hand, walked on and disappeared down the alleyway, the long-drawn chords of his mouth organ trailing behind him.

'La Mère will be in the kitchen,' Rousset said. 'Tell her I sent you. We shan't be long.'

'Thank you.' The young woman had a clear, liquid voice in which there was now no tiredness. 'Thank you.'

Then she and the boy slipped past Rousset and in at the door.

For a moment Rousset sat still, alert, wondering, without thinking of the stranger or Fabri, sniffing the air. The sound of this swift second of passing, its smell still hung about him in the blue haze. The woman's clear, liquid voice, which had spoken only these few words, lingered not as a sound but as a smell, a warm, rich perfume. Or, wondered Rousset, was it the other way about? The warm, rich smell of her body remaining, after she had gone, as a clear, distinctive chord of fluent sound? Suddenly he thought of Archambault and his great idea of all human beings resembling animals and he smiled. Clearly it was a most absurd idea. There was no animal to resemble this girl.

All at once, as he sat there squatting on his doorstep, he knew what it was. That rippling perfume of a human voice, that dark copper tune, ah yes, now he knew it. Strong and rich and dark with the colour of the sun and beautiful in the young ripeness of life, this girl was like a grape. Truly, Rousset thought, in my day I am discovering some noteworthy things.

Into the stillness suddenly spoke the tall man.

'Roquefort,' he said, as if to himself, just that. 'Roquefort——'

Rousset jerked his head. He had quite forgotten his presence.

'Been here before?' he asked.

'No,' answered the man.

Rousset felt the moment had come for him to get up. He had always believed himself to be quite a tall man. But now that he stood beside the stranger he felt small and almost insignificant.

'What made you come?' he asked.

The stranger did not reply at once. His eye wandered over the square. They were keen eyes and they saw all they wanted to see. The citadel, squat, square, as the far end, with its stone ramp descending towards the paved square in a wide curve like the embrace of two gentle arms, and the tall, leaning agave plaintively rearing its withered yellowing body in the centre. The church, small, grey, and neglected, carrying its rusty wrought-iron bell cage like a forgotten crown on its weary head. The dark passage under the pillared vault whence, after more than a lifetime, still came the smell of rotting wine wafted across the square by the wind from the old, mouldy barrels that used to be stored there. The inn, doorless, windowless, but two small glasses still standing in the window sill, shrouded in tender grey spiders' webs, waiting patiently; the bakehouse; the little alleyway—the stranger's eyes saw them all as they wandered round the square.

At last he lifted his stick and pointed towards the distant hills.

'You know you can see it many days away?' he said. 'Days and days away you can see it. From the shores of the sea you can almost see it. Almost, though not quite. Although, if you know where it stands, you can see it from anywhere, weeks and years away, by day and also by night. Roquefort the Proud. Tall and strong and beautiful.'

'Yes,' Rousset answered. 'I, too, have seen it like that. All through my life. By night too. You're right. Tall and——'

He fell silent and listened. At that moment, as he repeated the stranger's words, his ear caught the clue. Just listen. The way he, Rousset, had said or was about to say them, and the way the stranger spoke them. There was the difference.

'Tu la vois, haute et forte et belle comme si tu l'avais vue depuis ton enfance——'

Yes—the man was a stranger. Not only a stranger to Roquefort. Not only a stranger to the valley of the Varouse. Not only, perhaps, a man from Vargelonnes. No—a stranger altogether, a foreigner.

'Sit down and rest your feet on the bench by the window,' said the

Mère Barthélemy. 'Push the things aside. Take your shoes off. You will walk no farther this night.'

The girl obeyed. It was almost dark in the kitchen. There was a red glow from the charcoal fire that burned under the big iron tripod in the open fireplace. The black hollow of the hearth was sombrely illuminated. In it the little red flames of the fire and the rising wisps of steam from the cooking pot danced, magnified, and queerly distorted. Against it stood the large, massive shadow of the woman who, with her back turned to the room, kept stirring the pot slowly and steadily.

'And how does one call you?' she asked.

'Janine.'

'And the little *môme*?'

'Rémy.'

While stirring with her right hand La Mère reached with her left for a white earthenware bowl that stood on the ledge in a row with five or six others. The ledge ran round the hood of the hearth, and there were many things on it besides the bowls—the coffee grinder, a large sieve in a wooden frame, cups and the coffeepot, jugs and jars, and together they were a numerous assembly of oddly shaped little shadows in the flickering light. The pots and pans were hanging by their handles on hooks, and their polished copper shimmered as the glow of the fire caught them now and then.

La Mère filled the bowl from the pot and handed it to the girl.

'He should eat now and then sleep,' she said; 'he's asleep already. From how far have you come to-day?'

'St. Saturnin des Vignes,' Janine replied. 'Is that how it is called?'

'Yes,' La Mère said. 'Here's a spoon.'

The boy sat on the bench, his back against the wall, his feet dangling above the floor. He was obviously too tired to eat. Sleepily he held the bowl in his lap, ate a spoonful or two, and then his hand dropped again.

'You must not mind him, please, madame,' Janine said, embarrassed. 'You're very good to us.'

Softly she urged the child again to eat, at least a little. Then she looked up again and smiled, trying to swallow a lump in her throat. 'At home we call it *la ratatouille*.'

'We call it the same.'

'It's tomatoes, and leek, and potatoes, and bits of beef, isn't it? And poivron. Red poivron.'

'Yes. That's how it should be made.'

'You must not mind him, madame, please——'

'Don't trouble yourself explaining,' La Mère said calmly.

She turned away from the hearth and came over to the long table by the bench, took the bowl, and poured the soup back into the pot.

'He should sleep in the back room with my sons,' she said. 'He will be all right there. You'll find some unused blankets by the window.'

Janine understood. When she returned to the kitchen La Mère had begun to lay the table. She was spreading the bowls and spoons, and Janine silently helped her, breaking several long flutes of white bread into sticks of equal lengths which she placed beside the bowls.

'How many?' she asked.

'Five for the family,' La Mère answered. 'The Archambault, yourself, and the man outside. Eight altogether.'

She lit the oil lamp and placed it in the centre of the table. Her movements were slow and deliberate, and she walked with a slight, painful slur of the feet that told of her age, of the beginning of her weariness, and of her massive weight.

'How far is it to Peira-Colonna?' Janine asked.

Her voice, now that she was alone with the older woman, had lost its shyness, though none of its modesty. It had lost its tiredness too; it was of an unexpected fresh directness. La Mère raised her head and looked at her.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'Perhaps my husband can tell you. Whereabouts is it?'

'It's a farm belonging to one Lenoir. Monsieur Jean Lenoir. I was told it is beyond Peyrouton.'

'That is in Vargelonnes,' La Mère answered. 'Across the plateau.'

'Far?'

La Mère shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, far,' she said; 'what does far mean? It may be far and it may not. It's not a question of its being far, petite. Let me tell you, what do you want to go to Vargelonnes for? You know the country?'

Janine shook her head.

'Ah, well, nor do I. But I know that I wouldn't go there, not of my own free will, and not even if forced. It's——'

Her square-spread hand described a vague movement above the lamp and then dropped again.

'Rousset can tell you all about it,' she then said. 'You know this man—what's his name—Lenoir? I didn't think you did. Rousset's two great-uncles were killed up in Vargelottes. His own father, he was a mere boy, just managed to get away. His grandfather took a deep cleft across his forehead away from Vargelottes and had it for the rest of his life. My own grandfather too. He and Rousset's were friends. They did many things together. They never again went to Vargelottes. Nor did anyone I know. Now I've told you all about the family.'

'I never wanted to go there,' Janine answered. 'But now we've come this far, and I don't know of any other place.'

'Joannon goes there from time to time,' La Mère said with a vague dark hint in her voice. 'That's his own business, of course. But still, he goes there.'

'I never wanted to go there,' Janine repeated nervously. 'But now I've come this far——'

'Here come my sons,' La Mère said.

Outside in the square the stranger looked up into the sky. It was the sky of late autumn, blue and thin.

'How does one live up here?' he asked.

'Live?'

Rousset, smiling, gave a shrug.

'I don't know,' he said, puzzled. 'One rises; one goes to bed. One eats; one works. Like that.'

He glanced at the man, at his big crude face that seemed carved from wood, his bristly reddish moustache, his big wooden forehead and jutting chin, his large, crudely carved nose, and his sharp blue eyes that looked out keenly from under their ginger brows. He had to laugh. He liked the man.

'The days are full,' he added quickly in a sudden rushing impulse of friendliness. 'Quite full. There's food in the valley. There will be wine in the vineyards—it isn't difficult.'

The stranger nodded.

'I should tell you my name,' he said.

'There's no need.'

'Oh, there is, because I mean to stay here. I am Fortescue.'

What a name, thought Rousset.

'That goes,' he answered. 'Welcome. We live over there. To-night you must eat the soup with us. To-morrow we'll see.'

'Yes, to-morrow we'll see. Does anyone own this place?'

'No one. The people who used to live here left long ago. They went to the lower valleys. Everybody went away.'

'Why?'

'Ah, that,' Rousset said. 'I wish I knew. Some say because the snow drowned the vineyards. Others say the people of Vargelonnes came down from the plateau and ravaged the fields and burned the corn. My grandfather used to tell a story of a bloody battle up in Vargelonnes. But I don't know. A good many got killed. But why and how I can't say. It's a mystery.'

'How long ago?' asked the man named Fortescue.

'Fifty years, sixty years perhaps. No one knows. Everybody went away. People living as far down as Ollioure and Chadourne left and went away. My own people left. They went to live at Port Cros, at the river mouth. They never liked it. It wasn't a bad place as places go, but we never liked it. It's hard for people who've come down from the mountains to settle by the sea. My grandfather loathed the sea, and the smell of fish gave him a violent temper. The same with my father. He couldn't get on with the fishermen and said they were all Italians. The fishermen didn't like to be called Italians, although most of them really were. So there we were.'

He paused and gathered his straying thoughts.

'Yes, and then, for no known reason, the Varouse changed its course. Something must have happened up in Vargelonnes. There are dead villages, too, up in Vargelonnes, they say. A woodsman who came down not long ago said the forests are dead, and in the clearings the dead villages have fallen to the ground and are lying about like the white bones of dead animals. Some one must have cast a big fear over the land at one time. It was still here when I came. I felt it. Now it is slowly going away. It's gone away from this place, and it's gone away from the valley.'

He paused again. There, he thought, what am I doing, talking such a lot to one who is a stranger? The afternoon had fled from the valley; evening was fast on the march down from the mountains. The blue haze that had begun to shroud the soft outlines of the houses suddenly reminded Rousset of that first evening when he arrived before the rock, that moment when darkness began to fall and he called out and no one answered.

'When you came up,' he said pensively, 'at the crossroads, about an hour upwards from St. Saturnin des Vignes, did you see a dead apple tree standing at the edge of a dead field?'

'I did.'

'And did you see a dead man with a tattered straw hat hanging from it on a piece of rope?'

'No,' answered Fortescue. 'I saw the apple tree. But no dead man.'

'I thought so. So he's gone. Because the fear's gone.'

He turned and with his outstretched hand pointed at the dusky houses.

'You can take any house you like that you find empty,' he said. 'Except that one. It belongs to the Centurion. A man called the Centurion.'

'Is he one?'

'Is he what?'

'Is he a centurion?' asked Fortescue. 'Does he lead a hundred men?'

It had not occurred to Rousset that the name of the Centurion might have a meaning.

'I haven't seen any,' he answered, a little perplexed. But on second thoughts he shrugged his shoulders. 'Perhaps he does, though,' he added doubtfully. 'I don't know; he doesn't come here often.'

In the alleyways, under the vaults and porches, behind the corners of houses and blind windows of deserted rooms, darkness had been waiting its hour. Now it began to slip out. It crept round the street corners; it stalked forward with caution from the arches. It made long sliding strides as it moved across the square behind the backs of the two men talking quietly; it came up the cobbled passages on a hundred small and swiftly running feet. It clambered over the window sills, reached out for the ground with long arms and legs, and stepped into the open. Quietly, at its approach, the dead houses closed

their eyes and tucked themselves away into the folds of the falling night.

Rousset gazed down the dark Bourgade. It was still. Only the rustling purl of the Varouse came up with the cold night wind, softly, monotonously. Halfway down the Bourgade there was the flicker of a little yellow light. Archambault's house. Presently it would go out and you would hear the blacksmith's heavy steps come up the street, his figure shrouded in the haze of the night. Across the street it was dark. Joannon had gone away three days ago, to Aubagne, to sell a bag of mole and badger skins and bring back tobacco, matches, and paraffin for the winter. The sound of Fabri's mouth organ came from somewhere behind the church.

'Now,' he said dreamily, 'they're beginning to come back. Not the same people, of course. Others are coming. But they're coming.'

He heard the blacksmith's footsteps approach through the dusk up the street towards the square. Then the voice of the girl called out from his house. With sudden urgency he tugged the stranger by the sleeve.

'Come inside,' he whispered. 'La Mère is waiting. The soup.'

After the soup Archambault got out his tobacco pouch and paper and rolled himself a cigarette. Having it firmly nested in the bushy wilderness of his walrus moustache, he brushed the bread and tobacco crumbs from the table in front of him, clasped his hands round his half-filled wine tumbler, and looked round.

'Now, about those Italians,' he said.

'How many are they?' asked Rousset.

'Two men. But they have brought very multitudinous families.'

'What do you mean?' La Mère asked. 'Many children?'

'Yes. Two wives and an incalculable number of children.'

'Well, how many?' La Mère insisted.

'I don't know,' Archambault answered. 'I haven't counted them. Nobody can count them. I doubt whether they themselves know just how many they are and which belong to whom. The question is, do we want any Italians about?'

'This place doesn't belong to us,' Rousset said gently.

He glanced at Fortescue, who was sitting opposite him, his back stiff against the wall. The big man had a large wooden smile on his face.

He glanced at the girl who was sitting three seats away, her head lowered, her cheeks flushed with fatigue, and then his eyes returned to Archambault.

'All right,' said the blacksmith. 'But fire-raisers?'

'Did they say they were fire-raisers?' La Mère asked.

'They did and they didn't,' Archambault said. 'What do you want, Italians!' He took his cigarette from his mouth, wiped his moustache with the back of his hand, and put it back. 'Look,' he went on patiently but with slight anger, 'I am sitting on my doorstep when they come up, the two men first, the brothers, and afterwards the whole lot is crowding around. So I talk to them from my doorstep. I ask them where they come from, and they say Albèze, or some such place no one has ever heard of. "And why did you leave that place?" "Because," they say, "because of a fire which destroyed most of the houses in the village." "Ah," I say, "because of a fire, and who was it that started the fire?"'

He paused, took a gulp of wine from his glass, and looked round.

'“Well, who started it?” At first they don't answer at all, and then they glance at each other sheepishly, and suddenly they begin to talk, both at the same time, and so rapidly I thought they were lunatics; like a waterfall they talk together and across each other, and I understand very little of what they say. However, it appeared they were accusing each other of each having laid fire to the other's house. It appeared that furthermore in the process the whole village was burned down, which they say is equally regrettable and inexplicable. This being so, I ask them, “Do you always burn your houses, and do you intend to do the same thing here?” Which question sends them into a fit of gesticulation, and they cry, “Oh no, oh no, God forbid; it was an accident,” and also there was a prejudice against Italians where they were, at Albèze, and it was one Bullfrog who had made the prejudice against the Italians. So I say, “What are you talking about, and who is this Bullfrog? I have never heard of him, and at any rate he won't make any prejudices here in this place. Here in this place,” I say, “we make our own prejudices ourselves.” That is what I said.'

'And what did they say?' Rousset asked, smiling broadly.

'They? They kept on making very extraordinary gesticulations and raising their hands in despair and swearing oaths of all kinds and

spluttering all the time, "Oh no, God forbid; we should never dream of letting such a terrible thing happen again. Gracious God, no," and promising all the time. So what do you know?"

'And where are they now?' La Mère asked.

'Oh,' the blacksmith said with a vague, despairing gesture, 'all over the place, down the Bourgade. They're settling down.'

He rose and went across the kitchen to the door, his hands in his pockets.

'The question is, do we——'

'No, no,' Rousset answered gently. 'We don't own the place——'

'Sure, sure,' Archambault answered in the door. 'Well, I had better go and see what they're up to. Good night, the company.'

'Good night,' the company round the table answered.

There was a silence. La Mère rose and cleared away the plates and tumblers.

'Myself,' Rousset then said, looking in front of him, 'I don't care much for stories. I mean stories of what happened to people and why and how and all that.' He raised his bearded face, and his eyes, wandering round slowly, rested on the girl. 'Some,' he said, 'will tell you their whole life in ten minutes when you meet them resting on a milestone by the road. Others—no. I don't go by that. I don't care if I don't know anything about people.'

He emptied his glass and pushed it across the table. He smiled.

After the men had gone and their voices died away the kitchen lay in silence and almost in darkness.

'Cover the fire, petite,' La Mère said, 'and talk no more.'

Janine knelt in front of the hearth. Carefully she embedded the low-glowing fire in its soft, warm cinders. Like this it would preserve its life until the morning. From her hands which moulded the ashes a shudder of waning warmth ran through her tired body. She looked up.

La Mère stood beside her, a tall broad shadow, hardly discernible against the darkness of the kitchen.

'And so,' Janine said, her face bent low over her work again, 'so from one place to the next. Always it begins well; it looks friendly. Always in the end it turns bad and unfriendly. And it isn't the fault of the child. It is something else.'

'Don't trouble yourself,' La Mère said.

'I must trouble myself,' Janine answered with a clear voice. 'The child, madame, one mustn't think I don't care for him. I like him well. Often I used to think: Why must I have this child; honestly, why must I? Sometimes people would say, "You should put this child in an institution." I know nothing about that sort of thing, madame, except that they ask money for the right of taking one's child away. Besides, I've got used to him. I've had him for seven years now, and now I like him. It's got nothing to do with him. It's something else.'

'Yes, petite. Now talk no more. I know your story without your having to recount me all the details. Lie down now and sleep.'

Janine wiped her ash-dusty hands on her apron and then rested them in her lap. Suddenly she felt how tired her hands were from holding the boy's hand, from carrying the large bundle, from bending and holding and carrying all day long and many days before that. The fire was well covered. The red glow had died. There was only the faint light from the small stump of a tallow candle that stood in a saucer on the sill. Janine, her hands folded, waited.

'I look at you,' La Mère said, 'and I think out the details for myself. Bodily misfortune, petite, comes in many shapes and manners. One has a big swollen body, heavy like a black, blown-up sausage, and drags it through the years on aching feet, and that is a misfortune. Another has a great fat wart with hair sprouting from it on her cheek, and that is a misfortune. Yet another has her breasts flat and dry with as little milk in them as the flat and crumpled ears of a dead ass, and that is a misfortune. And another has her body full and strong and pressing with the sap and juice of life like a ripe, bursting grape, and the menfolk running after her wherever she goes like dogs on the scented trail of a bitch in heat, and that is a misfortune too.'

'What should I do?'

'Not trouble yourself, petite. You're not running away from it by tramping across half the globe into the country of Vargelonnes. Don't trouble yourself.'

Janine nodded silently.

'If to-morrow you still want to go, then none here will say you can't. Again, if to-morrow you want to stay, none will say you mustn't.'

'How can I stay? I have nothing.'

'Who has anything?' La Mère answered. 'You will talk the night and your sleep and mine away with your questions. Who has anything? Anything besides his hands and feet and his eyes and ears, anything but his body and his pride to keep it alive with? There, it is past midnight, and you make me talk in the darkness like a school-teacher from his book. If the stranger says you should stay and keep his house for him, then do as he says.'

Janine lowered her eyes but said nothing.

'In a few days it will be winter. After that, when spring comes, the days will again look after themselves.'

She took the saucer with the tallow candle from the sill, and her shadow moved past the girl across the kitchen and towards an invisible door.

'Good night, *grappa*,' her dark, deep voice said.

There was stillness, and then the soft murmur of voices from outside. Rousset and the stranger were sitting on the doorstep talking quietly.

3

WINTER CAME THE NEXT MORNING.

Archambault, the early riser, was the only one among the people of Roquefort to see it descend in a sudden flashing battle between dawn and sunrise. He had risen when it was still dark. Behind the church and perched close to the rampart was a small, tumble-down house, and under its ivy-covered wreckage he knew to be buried some pieces of a once finely wrought-iron gate. He had discovered them the other day, and the thought of their rotting away under the fallen masonry kept troubling him. To him, iron of every kind and shape was an obsession. He went to pull it out.

In the distance, out over the sea, the sky was just beginning to change into a blackish grey as he trotted across the square. He knew that colour. To him, a restless man full of anger, quarrel, and dispute with himself, who never found his way to bed, who was bothered and

annoyed with sleep and rose at any odd hour, to him all shades of dusk and dawn were known with painful familiarity. That grey, he knew every thread of it. It resembled some thick, coarse cloth. At other times it was like crude muddy felt, then again like a cheap horse blanket that tears with a fuzzy rip when you pull it hard. On numberless mornings he watched it pushing up from the horizon. Archambault sniffed. It would not push very long, in ten minutes it would be gone and it would be light. He walked on.

He worked for half an hour, pushing the heavy blocks of masonry, tearing away the thick clusters of ivy which clung to the stone with a thousand desperately gripping little fingers, pulling, shifting, moving again. Gradually the iron emerged. Suddenly he dropped his tools. His hands were numb, frozen stiff, his eyes wet with cold. His nose had begun to drip. Above, the grey, coarse thickness had disappeared. The sky was blue. But there was no light. It merely grew colder and colder. Where is the sun? he thought, rubbing his hands. *Sacré*, is there no sun this morning?

The next moment the light burst forth. Archambault closed his eyes. He felt buried under a blinding shower of spray. The light pricked against his jaws and cheeks. Terrified, he picked up his things and stumbled back to the church and the square. There he halted abruptly. The square was flooded with light. The thin, cold air of the early morning hour quivered under the sudden onrush of fierce, colourless sunlight. It broke from the crest of the mountains and shot out across the blue autumn sky with a thousand fine, needle-like piercing arrows. The sun stood above the crest, the width of a hand above the highest ridge of Vargelonnes. Its rays, glancing the top of the woods with utter swiftness, thrust deep into the valley, setting the land alight with devouring, heatless fire. Now broad sheets of light fell from the sky into the square, bathing it in shimmering whiteness. It turned the cobblestones into polished tiles. The grey, earth-coloured walls of the houses became translucent and a moment later looked like glass. The ivy above the porch of the inn grew pale and seemed to freeze in the flood of light. Above, as he lifted his head, Archambault saw the arrows of light struggle with the thin, silken blue of the sky. The blue grew paler; it fled higher and higher, and the white fire that chased it almost dissolved it into its own whiteness.

Archambault pressed his tools tightly under his arm and pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. How cold the sun is, he thought, terrified, how bitter, biting cold its flashing onrush!

The next minute it was all over. He felt his feet, his hands, his chin thaw. The ivy above the porch turned gold and then its familiar dark green again. Faint warmth began to breathe from the house walls, the pavement, the roofs. Faint warmth lay on his eyelids and, with a slight shudder, ran down his spine. He looked up and saw the blue sky descend again, darker, warmer than before. The sun had risen the width of two hands, of three hands above the crest of the mountains of Vargelonnes. Its light, no longer sharp and stinging, flowed in its warm and gentle fullness. The air was clear as glass. There it is, Archambault thought; winter has come.

It filled the angry old man with sudden elation, almost drunkenness. He climbed on to the stone step of the fountain in front of the church and, forming his hands into a trumpet before his mouth, began to holler and hallo in long crazy blasts into the morning stillness.

Now doors were unbolted, windows pushed open, faces appeared.

'Ho, blacksmith!' Rousset Barthélemy called from his doorstep. 'What's happened to you?'

'Look at the sky, Barthélemy!' the man on the fountain step shouted. 'Look!'

'Blessed!' Rousset said, his breath streaming white from his lips. 'Blessed the seasons of Roquefort! Winter is here!'

Fabri appeared, a brick-red scarf wound round his neck, a towel over his shoulders, and made for the fountain.

'Ho, Archambault.' He grinned and gently pushed him aside. 'What has befallen you?'

He pulled off his scarf and started unbuttoning his shirt while with his other hand he began to turn the fountain handle. La Mère came round the corner from the back of the house slowly in her black felt slippers, carrying her large empty water can. The stranger joined Rousset on his doorstep in his shirt and trousers, his *espadrilles* unlaced, his unkempt ginger hair standing on end like a curling red flame. The little boy crept out between his high legs and hurried across the square on bare feet.

'Hey, you!' Rousset called from the doorstep. 'Get your shoes!'

'Now,' said La Mère, 'am I to wait till you've washed your pretty face?'

Fabri grinned, turning the handle.

'It runs empty,' he said; 'it won't draw.'

'Turn a little faster,' La Mère said.

'Maybe it's frozen,' Archambault suggested. 'It wouldn't surprise me.'

'Bah,' La Mère said. 'Who's ever heard of a well freezing up? Turn a little faster. Got to know your way about these things.'

'Winter's on,' Rousset said on the doorstep.

'Yes,' the stranger's voice steamed hoarsely. 'Not a day too early did I come up. Not a day. Now for a house.'

'It won't draw,' Fabri said. La Mère put down the can.

'Let me,' she said. 'I'll get you some water to wash your precious face in.'

'How there can be any water at all beats me,' Archambault observed, looking on interestedly, breathing into his stiff hands.

'There's been water before,' La Mère said, 'and there's going to be now. Now let me, Fabri; we haven't got all morning—'

'Because,' Archambault said, 'this is solid rock. Down at Terrerouge you've got to bore thirty and forty feet before you hit water. How can there be any up here, in the rock? Who bored this well, anyway? He must have known some tricks.'

'Here's your trick,' La Mère said.

A faint, soft gurgling came up as she turned the handle, not too fast, but steadily. Then a hiss, a spitting gurgle, and a splash. The drops sprang in all directions from the flat, empty stone basin.

'*Sacré*,' Fabri said, pushing his hand into the steady flow. 'Cold as ice—'

'Ho, and if you'd seen it!' Archambault cried. 'Seen it? Felt it, smelled it—the sun turning white, the sky ripping open like a paper bag with a blast, and the cold streaming down like an ocean of ice—ho, what a fright!'

'Now keep on turning,' La Mère said to Fabri.

She filled her large can, then rinsed her hands, dried them on her apron, and went back to the house. A little blue column of smoke rose from the Barthélemy chimney, steadily and straight as a candle. The

sky was all gold and blue and windless. The smell of charcoal smoke mingled with the hoar-frosted, sun-swept morning air.

'Keep on turning,' Fabri said to the little boy, who had come back in his shoes.

The smell of freshly made coffee came from Rousset's open door and pervaded the square.

Somewhere a voice had begun to sing, a young woman's voice. Fabri, his face wrapped in his towel, raised his head and looked, from wet, glistening eyes, in its direction.

'It's my mother singing,' the boy said.

'Now the snow begins to fall up in Vargelonnes. Joannon will be back in a day or two,' Rousset said. 'He'll be making haste now.'

'Keep on turning, son,' Archambault said, 'so an old man can wash his stupid face.'

Rémy, the boy, kept on turning the handle. The smell of fresh coffee and of warm bread filled the square. The people turned into their houses. Blue curls of smoke came from two chimneys now, from three, then four. The boy let the handle go, and slowly the water ceased flowing. He held his hands under the last drips and withdrew them quickly. He blinked against the sun. His mother's voice had stopped singing. The winter sun swept the square and the houses, the living and dead ones alike, with glistening freshness. A solitary hen appeared on the balustrade of the ruined citadel, looked round, burst into four or five shrill cackles, and, finding no response, went back where she had come from.

'Come with me,' Fortescue said to the blacksmith. 'I want to ask you about a house.'

'Which one?'

'I'll show you, if I can find it again.'

He laughed and, leaning on his stick, led the way across the square.

'Got a bad leg?' Archambault asked.

'Yes, a piece of shrapnel or two. Normally they don't worry me. Only when the weather breaks they hurt for a couple of days. Afterwards they get used to it and settle down.'

The blacksmith nodded in silent awe.

Fortescue walked past the inn, turned to the right, and followed

down a vaulted passage which presently ended abruptly at the top of a flight of stone steps. Here he halted and peered down. The steps, some ten or twelve in number and overgrown with grass and weed and dandelion, ran down steeply to the parapet which was all that was left of the ancient city wall, where they broadened into a small overhanging terrace, a few square feet wide. Beyond the low stone balustrade a wide and unexpected vista opened up of endless valleys, woods, rivers, and hamlets that lay below, shimmering in the winter sun, and, overlooking them, perched close to the parapet, stood a little house.

'That one,' said Fortescue.

'That one, no,' answered the blacksmith. 'Not La Goulette.'

'Is that the name?'

It was a frail and graceful little house, very different from the square and squat, dumb-looking stone blocks that surrounded it and knew no better than to turn their eyeless walls on its delicate beauty. Higher than they, La Goulette looked yet smaller. It had an upper story, a gabled roof, a slender front girded by a wooden balcony, and yet seemed more helpless than they, more timid despite its modest majesty, and a little afraid. They were like the rock on which they stood and seemed to have grown from it, short and stocky and unuprootable. This one had not grown from the rock. It had been put there, slim, graceful, on the edge of the precipice, with care and caution, by the hand of man. A lonely palm tree, the only tree on the whole rock, growing miraculously from a narrow cleft in its side, swinging its trunk in a drunken curve out into the open space and with a sudden bend back towards the earth, held a tattered, feathery hand protectingly over its pointed shingle roof.

'Why not?' Fortescue asked. 'What's wrong with it?'

Probing each step with his stick, he began to climb down. Archambault, visibly disconcerted, followed him.

'Nothing,' he muttered. 'Nothing, really. It's just—just not inhabitable.'

'It looks quite inhabitable to me,' Fortescue answered. They had reached the narrow little terrace in front of the house. The thick ivy covering its front shone dark green in the shadeless light. 'It's even got some furniture. Look in through the window. A table and three chairs. Very nice. I wonder who left them there?'

'That's just it. They belong to people.'

'Who?'

'Oh—just people. They sit round the table, the three of them, on odd evenings. I've seen them, and so has Rousset. Not always, but quite often. It depends.'

Fortescue smiled but did not answer. For a long time he gazed at the house, leisurely, lovingly. At last he turned half round and, leaning over the parapet, gazed out towards the sunlit country. The sun had begun to climb. The air was still chilly, but the light grew warmer with every minute. Fortescue pulled a packet of cigarettes from his coat pocket. Archambault got out his lighter. It was an old thing with a long piece of orange-coloured tinder fuze dangling snake-like from it. He had made it himself, in the dugout in the war, from a British rifle cartridge. They smoked in silence. The grey smoke of their caporals hung pleasantly about their noses for a moment and then dissolved in the clear, still air.

'Over there,' Fortescue then said. 'What would that be?'

'La Lorette,' Archambault answered, feeling the sun warm on his back.

'And beyond, the little place to the right?'

'Terrerouge.'

The caporal was firmly fastened to Archambault's upper lip in the left corner of his mouth. It kept hopping up and down with his words, burning slowly, and its paper gradually turning black and charred.

'The place I come from,' he added.

His hand kept slowly brushing from the rough surface of the parapet odd crumbs of sand and gravel that the wind of years had blown up here. Ah, he thought, it would take too long to make a stranger understand. Why a man leaves the place where he was born and has lived and worked for a lifetime, to go and live his remaining years in solitude among strangers. The trouble with me at Terrerouge was—he was almost tempted to begin, but then he wiped his hands on his trouser seat and decided to leave it alone. It was pleasant to see Terrerouge so small and so far away. He folded his hands before him.

'Now I'm enjoying my life,' he said with a sigh.

'So am I,' answered the stranger. 'And I come from much farther.'

'How far? Marseille?'

'Farther.'

Farther than Marseille. He's trying to make himself sound important, Archambault thought, disappointed. Surely he doesn't know how far Marseille is or he wouldn't pretend such a thing. Yet at the same time Archambault tried to think, rather frantically, What is farther than Marseille? Paris? Alger? Barcelona? He had heard vaguely of all these places but, having never been to any of them, was not altogether sure that, for instance, Barcelona was really a town in France.

'How much farther?' he asked.

'A good bit. From across the sea.'

Fortescue threw the dead end of his cigarette over the parapet and, without watching it fall hundreds of feet among the thistles and boulders of the dry river bed, as any other leisurely man would have done, turned back and once more glanced at the house.

'Now about those people,' he said. 'The ones that sit round the table. Who are they?'

'The three kings,' Archambault answered, turning towards him with a brusque, jerky movement of his head. 'Now listen.' His voice was grave and sounded slightly hurt. 'You must understand I'm not telling you a joke. About kings and things. I'm not. When you asked me, I said La Goulette. No. This is not a pleasantry. It's serious.'

'Of course,' answered Fortescue. 'Let's go inside and have a look.'

At first Archambault refused. Then, with a gesture of resignation, he followed. The door of the Goulette was at the side and opened towards a narrow, totally dark little alleyway filled with the strong, musty smell of mice, spiders, and dead ivy. The door was low and narrow and heavily padlocked.

'How do the three kings get in?' Fortescue asked.

Archambault gave a shrug. He tugged slightly at the lock as if to demonstrate that obviously no one could get in unless he possessed a key. To his surprise the lock came off in his hand, bolt, handle, and all.

Fortescue had to bend his long back to pass under the lintel of the door, and Archambault, following him, did the same, although there was no need, for he was a small man. The narrow ante-room lay in semi-darkness. From a single small window a ray of bright sunlight

slanted across the bare boards of the floor. A steep and narrow staircase to the right, behind the door, seemed to lead upstairs. To the left a door stood ajar. Fortescue pushed it open. The room was bright with daylight. Its floor was boarded, its plaster walls panelled up to half their height. Strong old beams ran across its once whitewashed ceiling. Except for a trestle table and three chairs which stood in the bay window, the room was empty. The bay window looked out on the small terrace and the parapet.

Archambault remained close to the door, but Fortescue stepped inside. He stood in the middle of the room, his left hand in his coat pocket, his right mechanically pulling his big jutting chin. It was a peculiar gesture of his, as if he were tugging at a goatee which, of course, he had not got.

'Listen,' he said. 'No joking, blacksmith. Who cleans this place?'

'Cleans it? No one.'

'Somebody must be looking after it. The place is spotless. The floor swept, not a cobweb between the beams of the ceiling.' He passed the tip of his forefinger along the worm-eaten top of the trestle table. 'There. Clean and polished. Dusted this morning.'

Incredulity and apprehension were growing visibly on Archambault's black-bearded face. They gave it a fearful and haunted expression.

'That,' he answered, desperately munching his moustache, 'does not explain itself easily.' His nervousness grew. 'Let's go,' he added hastily. 'Have some sense. What do you want to move into this house for? A big man like you?'

The very idea made him burst into sudden hysterical laughter.

'A big man like you!' he repeated. 'Stand up properly and you'll be lifting the whole house from its feet. Your head will knock right through the ceiling and the roof. You'll wear the damned house round your neck like a collar. Ha, ha, that'll look very funny!'

His violent chuckle made his black beard, moustache, and shrub-like eyebrows dance crazily up and down in his red face as if they had come loose and lost their places.

'Or at night'—his cackling laughter carried him on—'just think! You'll turn in your bed and you'll simply knock the whole house and yourself over the precipice. And that'll be very funny too!'

Suddenly his voice dropped. What has he done? he thought as he stared at the tall figure before him. Bent his back? Bent his knees? Tucked in his head and neck? None of it. But then how does he manage to stand upright with his head erect in the dwarfish little room only half his own height? A cold shiver ran down his spine. No nonsense. The man fitted in comfortably; he moved about easily.

'Look here,' Archambault said, seized by a fearful premonition. 'Don't you believe in ghosts?'

'Of course I do,' Fortescue answered.

'Why, then, do you want to move into this house? To make the three kings angry?'

'I'll get on with them.' Fortescue smiled. 'I'll get a fourth chair and sit with them. Just show me their places.'

'Their places?' the blacksmith cried, exasperated. 'Why, King Francis sits here, at the top. The Duke of Burgundy on his right, and Prince Grimaldi opposite!'

'And no one on the King's left?'

'No one. But one day Prince Grimaldi took the wrong seat and sat in King Francis' chair. There was an unholy row. They ran about the room, chasing each other and swinging their fists. They're small fellows. When they rush about the room they're like mice scattering about between your feet.' Archambault drew his breath. 'Come out. Let's go.'

'And what do they do when they sit at the table?'

'Do? They drink wine from a big black bottle with a silver stopper. They pass the bottle round, each one taking a gulp. Then they have a rolled-up paper in front of them. They unroll it on the table and argue and bang their fists on it.'

'Where is the paper?'

'They take it with them each time. Of course. They wouldn't leave their paper lying about like that!'

'And how do they come and go?'

'Come and go! Why, they come on horseback. They keep the horses in the yard, tied up under the porch by the inn. They wear big plumed hats which they hang up on nails in the wall over there, all three in a row. They wear gauntlets so big they reach up to their elbows, and they fling them on the table. They've got high boots with

spurs that clatter when they walk and——' The blacksmith's voice snapped. 'I'm getting out of here,' he stammered and was gone.

Fortescue took no notice. He smiled to himself, his curious, hard, wood-carved smile, as he returned to the ante-room and climbed upstairs. The sound of his feet on the creaking boards of the staircase echoed hollowly through the empty house. The upper room was the same size and shape as the one below. He tried to open the window to the balcony, and the wooden handle and part of the frame crumbled in his hand. He had to loosen some of the ivy before it opened and he could step out. Archambault stood below by the parapet, breathlessly watching the appearance of the gaunt man on the frail balcony.

'Watch out!' he cried. 'Don't step any farther. The whole damn thing will come down any moment. Watch out or you'll break your neck!'

The balcony did not come down. The anguish in the blacksmith's face dissolved into utter incredulity.

'I'll get on with them,' Fortescue called down. 'You'll see.'

At which Archambault threw up his arms in despair and ran away.

Fortescue tugged at his imaginary goatee. Ghosts, he thought, and smiled his hard, wooden smile. Ghosts indeed. Who is a ghost? Have not I, Spencer Fortescue, often thought I was a ghost myself? Have not I felt fear of my very self, ghost-like, times without number, until that morning when, from the hill of St. Crispin, I saw this fortress towering into the blue morning sky and knew at last whither I was going?

He stretched his arms as if awakening this very moment from years of slumber. The sun had risen high above Vargelonnes. With a wide, sweeping embrace winter strode forth in glistening freshness across the valley towards the invisible sea.

Later, towards midday, when he came up to the square again, Fortescue saw Janine at the well. She stood with her back towards him, bent over a tub and washing-board, humming softly to the strong rhythmic movement of her arms. The boy, his unkempt mop of hair dropping over his forehead and eyes, stood watching her from the step of the fountain. About seven or eight other children of all ages

and sizes were sitting lined up in a row on the stone balustrade of the citadel, looking on in silence, their legs dangling. Rémy paid no attention to them. Fortescue walked up.

'So you're staying?' he asked.

She stopped singing and turned round. Her radiant sun-tanned face nodded happily.

'We're in the little house next door to the Barthélemys,' she answered. 'I wonder who lived there before? It's just right for us.' Her eyes glistened. All the tiredness and exhaustion had gone from them. 'Forgive me,' she laughed. 'I'm washing the boy's shirt.'

'Why are there so few people in this place, anyway?' the boy asked. 'There are many more houses than people. Do you know?'

'I don't. This is a very old place. People may have got tired of it and gone away.'

The boy shrugged his shoulders and looked at the man critically. It was clear that he considered the explanation childish and unsatisfactory.

'I owe you an apology,' Fortescue said. He was leaning heavily on his stick, his left foot pushed slightly forward. 'I behaved badly. I didn't realize. You must have been very tired, and I should have helped you with your bundle.'

'That afternoon?' She laughed lightly. 'Well——'

'Yes. I'm reproaching myself because it isn't the first time it happens to me. I'm too careless with people. I just walked past you and I don't think I even greeted you.'

'Oh yes,' Rémy said. 'You nodded.'

'Did I? That makes it worse. Because now you must remember me as a rude and unobliging fellow. I don't mean to be. I'm thoughtless.'

'You were deep in your thoughts,' Janine said slowly, remembering. 'You looked neither left nor right. So deep in your thoughts were you.'

'Oh, my thoughts,' he answered with a dismissing shrug. Then he looked up. 'I've fixed myself up down below, in a house called La Goulette, and I've been wondering——'

'Are there any ghosts in it?' Rémy interrupted from the fountain step.

'I'm told there are. Three of them, but I haven't seen them yet. Are you afraid of ghosts?'

'No. Who are they?'

'A king, a duke, and a prince.'

'At our last place there was a murderer. He used to come into the farmer's bedroom at night with his cut-off head under his arm, and he would place it on the farmer's chest, on the bedclothes.'

'Now, Rémy——' Janine frowned.

'And what did the farmer do? Was he frightened?'

'Not a bit. He was used to it. He would kick it off the bed, turn round, and go back to sleep. The ghost would pick up his head from the floor and walk out again. Once it rolled under the farmer's cupboard, and the ghost couldn't get it out again. The farmer had to get up and help him. It happened every Tuesday night.'

'Enough, Rémy,' Janine said. 'Get along.'

The boy laughed and with a sly wink at Fortescue sauntered off.

'I was wondering,' Fortescue began again. 'Did Madame Barthélemy speak to you?'

'Yes,' Janine answered, blushing a little. 'You're very good to me.'

'It isn't much,' he said apologetically. 'Very little, in fact. Just cooking a meal and cleaning up. For the rest I can look after myself. You won't have to keep me company. I like being alone. It's a bad habit, but I like it. You would do me a service.'

She looked straight at him with a smile.

'Oh no. I'm poor. Poorer than you think. I'll work gladly. I've got nothing good to remember.'

She said it very naturally, but he felt immediately the distance which her words placed between him and herself.

'Nor have I,' he said modestly. 'That is why I came here.'

He straightened himself up and looked round from his height.

'Suppose,' he said in a vague tone of voice, 'suppose we had come up here and found the place deserted, without a single soul, as it might well have been. Who could know from the distance? Would you have stayed?'

'I was on my way.'

'Of course. You were on your way. I wasn't. I would have stayed. Yes, I'm sure I would. Even so.'

He laughed softly.

'Now look,' he said.

Turning round, Janine saw Rémy standing in front of the row of children who were lined up on the balustrade, legs astride, arms akimbo. He was obviously pulling grimaces at them, for the children stared at him with their mouths open, terrified and speechless.

'They're the Italian kids,' Janine said.

'Your boy is frightening them out of their wits. He's got a wonderful imagination.'

'Oh no,' Janine answered calmly. 'The story about the farmer is quite true.'

She bent down and picked up the wet shirt. She wrung it over the tub and then spread it between her hands. At that moment a volley of howls and shrieks came from the balustrade. The Italian children, stumbling over each other, were careering off in all directions. Rémy came strutting along, laughing.

God, she thought, sometimes he frightens me, that boy. Embarrassed, she muttered something. Then she looked up and saw that she was alone. Fortescue stood in front of the inn, talking to Fabri.

Fabri kept rubbing his neck with his flat palm as he listened to the other man. His eyes were on Janine all the time, and once or twice he tried a smile. But she didn't notice it. She felt frightfully alone, deserted, helpless, and terrified, as so often before.

The next day Fortescue borrowed Rousset Barthélemy's ass to go down to St. Saturnin des Vignes to fetch his belongings which he had left at the inn there. They were an old and yellow bulging straw-plaited bag with brown leather straps and a heavy wooden box with leather handles, and the sons of Rousset helped him to carry them up the Bourgade because the ass was too tired for the steep ascent. When they passed Archambault's house the blacksmith was sitting on his doorstep, a half-smoked, dead caporal dangling from his upper lip, bits of rusty iron, a hammer, and a pair of pliers strewn about him.

'Busy, Archambault?' Fortescue asked.

'As you see.' The blacksmith grinned. 'I'm making a new lock for your door, you foolish man.'

He looked up, and an inscrutable smile sat on his shrivelled, hairy face.

'What have you got in that box to make it so heavy?'

'Books,' Fortescue answered and grinned back.

When he reached his house Janine met him on the doorstep, looking puzzled.

'Monsieur, I don't understand. How many chairs did you have in the room below, round the table?'

'Three, of course.' He almost added: One for the King, one for the Duke, and one for the Prince. 'Why? Are any missing?'

'No. There are four now. And for the life of me I can't think where the fourth comes from.'

'Nor can I.'

He went inside. There was indeed a fourth chair, of precisely the same kind as the rest, standing against the formerly empty side of the large trestle table.

From the door Janine watched Fortescue as he looked around in the tidied room. He said nothing. But she saw that he was greatly pleased with himself.

At the end of the week, a few days later than Rousset had predicted, Joannon returned. He stepped into the Barthélemy kitchen just as they were sitting down for the soup.

'Salute, the company,' he said.

He dropped his bundle by the door.

'Ho, Joannon!' Rousset said. He rose from his seat and stretched out his arms towards him. 'I'm content you're back.'

Renée, who was sitting farthest from the door, slipped from her seat and across to the hearth. Fumbling for a bowl in the semi-darkness, she held her breath.

The woodsman, standing in the half-open door, looked as if he had risen from the bottom of the sea. Moonlight, like wet silver, was dripping from his leather jacket. His smooth high boots glistened. He wore a thick green woollen scarf round his neck. Now there was a smell of snow, of pine needles and frozen earth about him. He took off his little brown hat, and suddenly the green starlight shone up in his eyes.

'There,' Rousset said. 'Look at him. He looks like——'

The river, the girl thought breathlessly. The woods under the snow.

The wind-swept plateau. The trees. The mountains. The luminous night.

'Sit down,' her father said excitedly. 'Come in and sit down!'

'And close the door, for the love of God,' La Mère said. 'Rée, another bowl and some bread.'

The boys made room for him on the bench. With trembling hands the girl placed the bowl filled with steaming hot soup before him. He looked up.

'Salute,' he said, half aloud. 'I'm content to see you.'

'Yes,' she breathed. She put a long flute of bread beside his bowl.

'Break it for me.' She broke it for him.

'Gramercy,' he said.

La Mère sat down again, but the girl remained standing by the hearth with her back to the fire. Her father had his elbows propped on the table. His bearded face between his palms, he watched the woodsman eat. Joannon ate two mouthfuls and then put down the spoon. He looked round the table and smiled.

'I'm content to be back,' he said softly.

'Eat,' Rousset said happily. 'Everything went off all right?'

'Everything,' said Joannon, eating. 'I brought all I could carry. The rest is coming.' He pushed a large piece of bread in his mouth, chewed steadily for a long time without speaking, and then said: 'They are now running a coach down from Villehaute as far as Terrouge once a week. Perlus, you know, who has the café at Villehaute, his son is running it. He's bringing two sacks of seeds down next time he comes. All we've got to do is fetch them up from Terrouge. He'll leave them at the inn.'

'That's a good idea,' Rousset said.

'It saves four days on the trip each time.'

He had finished and pushed his bowl and spoon aside.

For the rest,' he went on with a glance at the girl, 'I didn't amuse myself. Not very much.'

He turned to Rousset.

'I was in a hurry to get back. I wanted to talk to you, patron.'

'Don't call me patron.'

'Ah yes, you're the patron all right.'

Rousset produced a small square packet of *tabac gris* and a packet

of cigarette papers from his pocket and pushed them across the table.

'There. Smoke,' he said. 'Anything you heard on your way? A story?'

'No,' said the woodsman, rolling himself a cigarette. 'I'll tell you.'

La Mère had cleared the table. The boys rose from the bench and pushed past Joannon towards the door. Archambault, with a half-loud 'good night,' left too. Renée moved towards the door of the chamber at the back of the kitchen, but when she passed Joannon he stretched out his hand.

'Don't go,' he said.

He rose for a moment and fetched his large bundle from the corner by the door. He put it in front of him and began to untie the big, complicated knot.

'With your permission, patron,' he said. 'I brought something.'

'Stop calling me patron,' exclaimed Rousset excitedly. 'Go ahead.'

The girl stood beside him, her left hand resting on the table. He opened the knot and took out a flat parcel wrapped in green tissue paper.

'It's something for a woman,' said La Mère.

'I'd better thank you now,' continued the woodsman, 'for the soup and bread at your table this evening, for all the soups and breads I've eaten in this house.'

'Yes, yes,' La Mère said with mocking impatience. 'You're not going away again. What is it?'

Joannon handed the parcel to the girl. 'There. You open it.'

The parcel slipped from Renée's fingers on to the floor. She bent down to pick it up, and her face was deeply flushed when she rose again, holding a bright yellow silk scarf in her hands. Joannon had his face turned away. He was trying hard to appear unconcerned and busied himself relighting his cigarette.

'So that's your tale?' Rousset asked. 'And the hurry?'

Joannon gave an embarrassed shrug. Small red specks of nervousness were running up his sunburned neck.

'Oh,' he said with a throaty voice. 'I've been carrying it about with me for a long time.'

'So you have,' La Mère said, amused. 'It's nice, I'm sure. Show me, petite.'

With a deep, heaving sigh the woodsman turned round.

'I'm doing it badly, patron,' he said with an unhappy voice. 'All along the way I've been thinking how best to do it, and now I'm doing it so badly.'

He looked at La Mère and then back to Rousset.

'You're doing it all right,' La Mère said.

Rousset, his face in his palms, said nothing. He was much more embarrassed than Joannon and equally ashamed of his awkwardness. He tried to hide a very large smile which he felt spreading all over his face right behind his ears. He felt a thick, choking warmth coming up his throat and driving tears into the corners of his eyes. He did not for a moment look at the girl.

'My mother,' he then said, 'she was the daughter of a shantyman from Vargelonnes. When my father first brought her to my grandfather's house one winter night'—he raised his arms in front of him above the table—'he carried her on his arms through the snow and across the threshold. Like this.' He smiled. 'Just now I was reminded of it.'

Joannon, opposite him, nodded. 'You've only got to say no, patron, and it will be no, and I'll ask your pardon.'

'Yes.' Rousset laughed. 'Let me look at you. Just let me hear you ask my pardon!' He laughed out loud. 'Rée! Fetch the "fine." The tall green bottle.'

The girl brought it from the cupboard.

'Pour out,' her father said.

She poured the first glass and placed it in the woodsman's ready hand. Her own hand shook slightly, and she spilled a few drops. They ran down Joannon's wrist.

'Fortunè,' he said.

He sat straight. His voice sounded wide, like an embrace. The great green starlight shone in his eyes.

'Fortune,' Rousset Barthélemy repeated softly, holding his own glass. 'I'm content to have you back.'

La Mère took the yellow scarf and placed it round the girl's neck.

'Praise God, you men,' she said, 'at last you've got it out.'

COMING UP TO the square from the bakehouse, La Mère halted, looked up, and at once saw the large glistening bird which was circling above the mountains. At first she wasn't quite sure. Her eyes were still a little blind from the dark cellar of the bakery. Her breath was short from climbing the steep flight of steps. Her arms were loaded high against her chest with the long loaves of bread. The sugar-coated fougasse she had made for Janine rested against her throat, crowning the crisp brown pile that was still crackling with heat. She paused for a second, blinked against the sun, and then saw it distinctly.

It was a very large bird. For a moment it seemed to head straight for the sun. Its slender body and shimmering wings sailed fearlessly into the cold yellow fire and instantly seemed devoured and lost. But it emerged again, spotless and unscathed. A silver shadow against the cloudless sky, it circled drunkenly above the woods, now rising, now descending again, a sharply cut silhouette that swam hesitatingly on the dark green carpet of the forest. Suddenly, however, it seemed to have found its direction. In straight flight it swept towards the valley and the foothills. It came lower and lower, glancing the treetops, apparently making deliberately for the roofs of the city. But then, as if by a last-minute change of mind, and just before clearing the fringe of the wood, it dived sharply and in a swift glide disappeared.

That, La Mère decided, was no bird.

She glanced about her, over the pile of bread and across the square, meaning to call some one, but then remembered that at this hour no one of any use was likely to be about. Whatever it was she had seen, it was not a bird. She turned and on slow, heavy feet walked towards her house. A moment later she reappeared, relieved of her load, carrying only the fougasse. She pushed it through Janine's open window and on to her table. The girl would be glad to find it when she came home from the forest, where she had been since the morning, gathering firewood. She wiped the crumbs and flour dust off her hands and once more looked out into the afternoon.

The thing had disappeared. Now she was not even quite sure that she had really seen it.

But Napoléon, down at the river bank, had seen it and watched its odd course. He had dropped the bunch of reeds from under his left arm, shifted the sickle from his right to his left, and with his free hand shielded his eyes against the sun. His shoulders and head, with the black pointed hat cocked back from his forehead, just rose above the tobacco-coloured reed tops which ebbed and flowed about him in the breeze like a thick brown sea. He stepped out into the field and called through his cupped hands:

'Ohé, Antonio ! Seen the plane? Up there, big, like a bird !'

In the distance, away up the river, another black pointed hat, another head and shoulders appeared above the reeds. This other man was in no hurry to answer. He stepped into the field, straightened himself, pulled up his trousers, and pushed back his hat.

'No !' he finally called back. 'Seen nothing.'

'And not heard it either?'

'No. Heard nothing either.'

'Been sitting on your ears, Antonio, eh?'

'What?'

'I ask,' Napoléon shouted, 'are you deaf, dumb, and blind, and are you sitting on your ears?'

'I've been cutting reeds. Why?'

Without waiting for an answer the distant figure gave a shrug, stepped back into the reeds, and resumed its work.

Ah, this Antonio, Napoléon thought, what a brother to have. He never sees or hears anything. One day the sun will fall down from the heavens right in front of his feet, and Antonio will see nothing and hear nothing and go on cutting reeds. Angrily he watched his brother's black hat pop up and disappear again, his brown coat, his bent back rummaging among the reeds like the hump of a brown animal. What an extraordinary individual to have for a brother !

I wish I could remember the spot where it disappeared, he thought. Once again he scanned the sky, the mountain slope, the towering brown rocks rising row after row towards the chilling afternoon sky, the winding course of the river, the black-green woods of Vargelonnes, the short patch of brushwood, the field below, Rousset Barthélemy's field, the hedge, the next field, Fabri's, flat and metallic in the yellow sunlight, the terraces of the vineyard leaning gently against the

hill, the farther range of hillocks, the land falling away slowly and in even waves towards the sea, and the sky above it, cloudless, thin, and translucent, like tissue paper. It can't have dived into the earth, he thought, without leaving a trace. I might go up and have a look round. But he knew that it was too far away. The afternoon was advanced, the light would not last much longer. The sun was still yellow, but in a few minutes from now it would have turned a cold copper and settled on the crest of the mountains. That would be the moment to turn for home. Already thin veils of haze, vanguards of the swiftly falling dusk of December, advanced from the foothills. Ah, if only for once this Antonio had looked.

'Ho, Antonio !' he called. 'Time.'

'Coming.'

The cut reeds lay spread in sheaves along the edge of the field as he had thrown them up in armfuls while pushing on and cutting. He began to gather them in, sheaf upon sheaf, waiting for Antonio to come down. They made a big pile. I'm going, he thought to himself, to procure myself an ass. Someway or other I shall sooner or later get an ass. That is certain. Antonio, of course, he doesn't need an ass. He's got children, a whole army of them. Clearly, with a whole army of children, one doesn't require an ass, provided one knows how to organize them to one's advantage. But Antonio, he will never arrange his children to his advantage, nor anything else, for that matter. It is generally recognized, Napoléon reflected somewhat bitterly, that his children are not a benefit but an affliction to him, and although he would never admit it, it is the truth all the same. The Lord, Napoléon decided for the hundredth time, has bestowed His gifts in a most unprofitable manner amongst us Italian brothers. Here am I, a man of intelligence, but childless and therefore unable to put my intelligence to good use. There is he, stupid and unable to think for himself, but surrounded by a host of descendants with whom he is unable to cope because he can hardly cope with himself. Had it not been for him, Napoléon, his wit and sharp mind, Antonio would long have submerged in an ocean of trouble brought about by his stupidity. Never, Napoléon reflected, shall I be rewarded for my sacrifice on his behalf, never. And the fire at Albèze nearly cost me my neck, very nearly indeed.

But for the moment, he thought as he watched Antonio plodding down towards him along the edge of the field, I have to think about this bird or aeroplane. Antonio was loaded with an enormous pile of reeds whose brown clubby heads kept wagging and bobbing up and down from his shoulders as he walked. An occurrence of such extraordinary rarity, Napoléon considered mournfully, will not easily be believed by the citizens of Roquefort. 'We have seen nothing,' they will say. 'But I have seen it,' he would insist. 'Well, and who else?' they would ask. 'Who was with you, Napoléon, when this occurrence produced itself?' 'My brother Antonio,' he would have to say. 'And has your brother Antonio seen it?' 'No,' he would have to admit, 'but that is because he never sees anything.' Whereupon the citizens would smile upon him pityingly, and Madame Rose behind the zinc at the café would laugh under her moustache and would say, 'Tell us some more, Napoléon Bonpère, of what has occurred in your rare and fruitful imagination,' and with the joke about his name he would finally get angry, but it would be too late, and the laugh would go to Madame Rose and the rest of the citizens. The grotesquerie of being called Napoleone Buonpadre, the Good Father, when so manifestly one was neither a good nor a bad father but simply no father at all, had at all times and on every occasion given rise to innumerable quips, jests, and chaffing badinage on the part of his contemporaries, and the citizens of Roquefort were no exception. Wherefore, Napoléon concluded regretfully, little or nothing was to be gained from imparting to the citizens the disturbing and indeed quite unbelievable information that a large aeroplane had this afternoon crashed somewhere in the wilderness of Vargelonnes.

Antonio, thus once again proved to be the cause of his discomfiture, past, present, and future, had come down and now stood looking at his brother, waiting for him to pick up his load.

'Eh?' he asked.

'Ass,' Napoléon answered.

'What?'

'I say you're a species of an ass of a brother.'

Good-humouredly Antonio smiled at him.

'That is an unfriendly thing to say,' he answered softly.

There was a simple and graceful wisdom in his voice which had

angered Napoléon ever since their boyhood days, and it angered him now more than ever and all the way home to the city.

The flyer was not dead.

But he was hurt, and the pain in his shoulder and the tugging and pulling at his right arm brought him back to consciousness. At each pull the pain ran afresh, like a burning flash, through his arm and into his shoulder. He was unable to move his head on account of something sharp and heavy which lay across his neck and another weighty thing which pressed his right shoulder down like a clamp. He discovered that he sat crouching on his folded knees with his left arm pressed against his stomach and his head thrust down almost into his lap. All the time, while he tried to recover his senses and make out his whereabouts, the frantic pulling and tugging at his injured arm went on, and suddenly he realized that his left arm was free and probably dangling outside and that some one outside was desperately tugging at it, trying to pull him clear of the wreckage.

'Hey!' he called. 'Stop it!' But his voice sounded faint, and it surprised him. Then he realized he was shouting into his own lap. The pulling went on.

'Stop pulling!' he shouted with all his strength. 'Whoever you are, stop! You're killing me!'

But the pulling became only still more determined. Oh, the damnation of it all, he thought; he's misunderstood me, he thinks he's doing well and now wants to do better.

'Listen,' he begged. But his voice was faint, and he felt that any moment he might lose consciousness again. 'Listen,' he repeated. Then he realized he might be calling in the wrong language. God knows where I am, he thought, in what country, among what people. Of course I've been shouting in Spanish all the time. He clenched his teeth. If only it would stop, he thought; how can I make myself understood? I don't want to be pulled to pieces after all this. God, it would be funny if it wasn't so God-awful. The pulling went on. This is where my sense of humour deserts me, he thought, and fainted.

When he came to again he was all right.

The heavy cutting thing had been lifted from his neck. His arms, his feet, and head were free. He found himself stretched on the ground,

his back and head resting against a large oblong boulder. He felt chilly and feverish. There was a veil of damp blue haze hanging before his eyes, but it was not, as he feared for a moment, the return of unconsciousness, a swimming grey mist in his eyes and his head. It was dusk which gently rose from the ground towards the yet half-lit sky. Tall pine trees stood around him on all sides, framing the small clearing where boulders, big and small, and the sawn-off trunks of other pines hovered about silently, like outsize grey-and-blue rabbits. There was not a sound except for the wind which now and then, in a sudden rush, swept through the mushroom-like crowns of the pine trees and then died away again. Darkness was falling fast as he lay there propped against the boulder. Slightly to his right, shrouded in the blue folds of the mist, he distinguished vaguely the outlines of his aeroplane. Crouching on its belly, armless and feetless, its nose buried stupidly into the ground, its spine hunched up in grotesque clumsiness, the wreckage looked like the battered skeleton of some ill-conceived prehistoric animal, dumped into the wilderness as if to demonstrate, in the face of plain, innocent Nature, its monstrous uselessness. You look pretty, my sweet, the flyer thought, and you can stay the way you are, for all I care. Of all the preposterousness, the preposterousness of man's ambition to fly! Walk, man, he thought; walk on your feet and swim if you must. But do not fly. That spoonful of liquid which is always lacking, of which you are invariably short at the height of the most crucial moment, it turns you into Nature's fool and forces your nose down into the very ground from which you rose. Walk, man, on your feet, and you will not crash. Man is not meant to crash on to his earth from ten thousand feet. He who walks need not fear a forced landing. Countries, cities, villages, and places which you cannot reach walking on your feet are not worth visiting. Ah yes, your mind flies. It flies across borders and mountain ranges. It flies through anger and protest into unrest and revolution. It is everywhere. But that is no reason why your feet should lift themselves from the earth. I should be glad that I have crashed at last. I shall never fly again.

Ah, my arm hurts, he thought; there is the devil of a fever boiling up in my shoulder. Where am I and what is happening anyway? He lifted his head a little to look in front and saw the boy.

'Oh,' he said, half dazed. 'You been here all the time?'

'I'm Rémy,' the boy answered. 'My mother——'

'Did you pull me out of this?'

'My mother says you mustn't move. I'm to watch you.'

The flyer did not understand. He stretched out his hand.

'Help me to get up,' he said painfully. 'Who put me here anyway? What is all——'

He did not finish his sentence. What am I talking? he thought. The little fellow doesn't understand me, and I don't understand him.

'My mother,' said Rémy, 'has gone for some water. She won't be long.'

All right, the wounded man thought, and let his head sink back. But as he lay, his eyes wandering for a moment across the darkening sky, the tone of the child's voice, some of his words suddenly came drifting back. They kept coming and going through his ears, dead sounds at first, then slightly familiar, then almost half alive, still elusive, still half meaningless, but only half, and then he caught them and was able to hold them.

'Ma mère est allée chercher de l'eau. Elle ne tardera pas à revenir.'

French. It was French; it was France after all. Not the kind of French he knew and remembered, not quite. But something queerly near it and yet not the same. Some words at least he had recognized distinctly. So you are in France, he thought, in France after all. Now, man, rise and walk on your feet, summon up your strength and courage, and walk off into the night and out of your destiny. Only your feet can save you now. God damn it all; it would happen, curse and hundredfold damnation.

'Here comes my mother.'

The noise of steps came from the fringe of the wood, the cracking of a twig, the sound of light feet on the brittle carpet of dry pine needles, and now soft steps in the damp grass of the clearing coming nearer. The young woman bent down to him and held a tin filled with water to his lips. Her arm slipped behind his neck and lifted it a little. He drank avidly before even looking at her face.

'Gracias,' he murmured with wet lips.

There was no answer. The arm did not slip away, and he was grate-

ful it stayed. He felt a smile gazing at him from a dusky face, a pair of eyes smiling, and in them the approach of the night. He wanted to smile back and felt how hard it was even for so small a smile to force its way on to his lips and into his own dim eyes. Oh, face of lifeless wood and dusty cobwebs, smile, he thought. You are not so old, not so hard, so dry and encrusted. Smile, you wretched face, make haste; this second and not the next will hold back the night.

‘Do you live up here?’ he asked.

The things I say, he thought, when I should be asking: Where am I and which country is this? Who are you and what are you going to do with me?

‘No,’ she answered. Her voice was humid like the night, humid like the soft, velvety coat of evening dew on soft ripe fruit. ‘No one lives up here. Up here we come to gather firewood. We live down there.’ Her strong arm at his back helped him to raise himself. He sat up, still leaning against the boulder. Her hand pointed over the treetops towards the sea. ‘You see the city on the rock? The tall, high rock above the treetops over yonder? It is shrouded in clouds. If you don’t know where it is perhaps you cannot see it. But you can see the lights from the houses.’

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘I see it now. It looks like a ship all ready to sail at nightfall.’

‘Can you walk?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. I suppose so, a little.’

‘It isn’t far.’

‘How far?’

‘Under two hours. We follow the river, and it is downhill all the time, except for the last bit, up the Bourgade. Do you think you can make it if I help you along?’

‘I’ll try.’

Walk it, he thought vaguely as she helped him up. Walk on your feet to the nearest inhabited place, step by step, slowly, steadily; be humble, my man, it isn’t far; it is under two hours; be thankful, my man, if your feet will carry you for just under two hours up aboard the strange, illuminated ship that will sail at the stroke of midnight. There is the devil of a fever working itself up in my shoulder. And it is getting cold.

'Let us go then,' she said. 'We shan't take the firewood. I can fetch it to-morrow.'

She turned and spoke a few rapid words to the boy, and the flyer guessed that she told him to run ahead, to light a fire in the hearth, do this and that about the house, and await their arrival, as they would follow slowly.

The boy, who had been sitting on a boulder, took a last look at the stranger and his mother who stood before him, in the blue haze of the sinking evening curiously welded together into one blue shadow. It was a long look, and it was full of suspicion. But he said nothing. He rose, nodded, and eventually sauntered off. Soon his little shadow had disappeared among the trees at the far end of the clearing. A very cold wind had begun to blow down from the plateau, and it gathered in the pine tops and shook them violently with a fierce, hissing sound.

Janine took her scarf from her shoulder, placed it round the stranger's neck, and tied it into a long sling in which she carefully placed his injured arm. The sling instantly relieved his pain. It took a big weight off his shoulder.

'At first,' he said, 'I couldn't understand your boy at all. Now I can understand quite well what you say.'

'Oh yes,' she answered. 'You can.'

And after a moment's hesitation: 'I can also speak a little Italian. If that's easier for you.'

'It isn't,' he answered, and thought: Of all the cursed languages.

They had reached the fringe of the wood and entered among the trees. Darkness enclosed them almost immediately. He felt her arm slip into his and was grateful. He needed it. A narrow little path strewn with stones and big, bony, knotty roots running across it in all directions led gently downwards. His feet, unused to walking in the dark, stumbled more than once, and her arm held him. She walked lightly beside him, on sure feet which seemed to know every inch of the way. Two hours, he thought. It is a bit long perhaps. But I've got to make it. Oh yes, I'm weak enough, but I shall make it. It had grown very cold indeed. From afar he now heard what seemed to him the rushing of water. But it could also be the wind which kept brushing incessantly through the treetops and sent big black birds dashing off

with wild cries among the trunks in the darkness. Now he distinctly heard the sound of purling water. It was quite near.

'The river,' she said. 'The Varouse.'

'Where does it go?'

'To the sea,' she answered from the darkness.

'How far is that?'

'I don't know. Four days or five, I think. I've never been so far.'

They walked on. Dim bluish light suddenly shone through between the trees ahead of them. They gained the river. From the mossy bank up among the trees they saw it rush past their feet in a hurling whirl, among blue-and-white boulders, fallen trees, and foam-covered islets, downward through a narrow ravine. The wood stood thick on either side, casting its cloak of shadow across the rushing water. The path followed the river among the trees along its left bank. For a moment they stood in silence and watched.

'Where are you taking me?' he asked.

'To my house. Where else?'

'And your people?'

'I have no one. Except the boy.'

'I haven't even told you my name. It is Gottfried.'

She looked at him quietly. He saw that she had not understood.

'Name?' she asked. 'I'm called Janine.'

'Gottfried,' he repeated, gazing down at the water.

Ah well, he thought, that is wrong, of course. It is German and the devil of a long time since anybody called me that. I must stop using swear words, he thought, stop thinking in curses and swears all the time. I'm out of all that, and I must get used to the idea that I am. My sweet, you were looking pretty when I left you up there, and I did not even take a last look at you.

'Godfrey——' he tried. 'Do you understand? Giofredo.' That, after all, was Italian again.

'Godefroy,' he said with a gleam. 'That's the French for it, isn't it? Godefroy of Bouillon, the crusader, Godefroy of Strasbourg, the minstrel——' Suddenly he fell silent. 'I must sit down for a moment.'

He propped his free elbow on his drawn-up knee and rested his reeling head on his flat palm.

'My mind is going round and round,' he murmured. 'I'm in France; yes, of course, I'm in France——'

He looked up and in the almost complete darkness saw her eyes watching him with anxious intentness.

'What is the time?' he heard himself ask, and thought: Pull yourself together and don't pass out. 'I must explain,' he muttered. 'I've been flying for sixteen hours, cruising round and round in this monster of a big plane, all alone and by myself, without a watch, without a compass, without a map. I'm a bit dizzy. Very giddy. And now I'm in France.'

He rose. He was shivering.

'We must go on,' he said, trembling.

'We are halfway,' she answered. Her arm was in his. They made a few steps. Then he halted again, abruptly.

'No,' he said, exhausted. 'I mustn't go with you. I can't.' In the darkness his free hand groped for her two hands, and when it had found them it clasped them firmly and pressed them against his chest. 'Listen,' he said, 'I shan't forget. I don't quite know how I'm going to remember you because I've hardly even seen your face, but I shan't forget. You've saved my life. Without you I should have been suffocated in that monster.' He spoke more rapidly; his words became an exhausted, confused mutter. 'Thank you. Good-bye. You've been good to me.'

He let go of her hands.

'You're ill,' she answered calmly. 'That's all. Come.'

There was silence and then a deep, hopeless sigh.

'Yes,' he muttered. 'I know. I wouldn't get anywhere alone without being caught, anyway. You're right.'

'Caught? Why?'

'You—you must hide me. You mustn't tell anybody that you found me. The police mustn't know; the gendarmes——'

'Have you done anything?' Her voice, in the darkness, was calm and untroubled.

'No. Yes. I don't know.' He gripped her hand again. 'I have no papers. You understand? No papers. No right to be here, or anywhere. No permission. If the gendarmes up at your place find me——'

'There aren't any,' she said.

'No gendarmes?'

'Not in these parts. We're only a few people up in Roquefort. No one knows we're there. Or no one troubles. Come now.'

She couldn't see his face. But she felt the immense relief that spread over it. Vaguely she guessed that with his free arm he was wiping the cold sweat off his brow.

In France, he thought, and no police. No gendarmes. No one knows we're here. Or no one troubles. It isn't true. It can't be true. He tried to find her face in the darkness and in it confirmation of the unbelievable. Oh yes, it is probably true, he thought. Perhaps all will go well. Perhaps. I cannot think any more.

'You haven't killed anyone, have you?' she asked softly. 'You aren't a murderer who must be afraid?'

'Killed? I suppose I have killed some people, perhaps many. I don't know. But I needn't be afraid of that. I'm a soldier. I come from a war.'

'Why, then, are you afraid?'

'Because I've lost it,' he answered.

He looked up and searched for her face. He could no longer find it. Darkness had swallowed it, as it had swallowed the river below their feet. The wind kept hurling itself through the treetops in long blasting sweeps. He looked ahead, from eyes dimmed by pain and the wind and the tears of exhaustion. The great stately ship rose from the sea of the woods in front of him, all lights set and shimmering through the darkness. A bell was chiming from afar. The wind carried the sound away in the opposite direction.

'Are you there?' he asked, searching for her hand.

'I'm here, soldier,' her voice answered.

That night the Centurion came back.

He crossed the bridge over the Varouse, but suddenly, in its middle, stood still, lifted his head, and listened. A church bell struck once, twice, again, a strange, high-pitched and lamenting tone. Four, five. Aimlessly the night wind carried it hither and thither. The Centurion put his ear to the wind. The wind was now coming strongly down the ravine in long trumpet blasts, but, once emerged from it, suddenly lost its force and scattered in all directions. Whence came the chiming?

The bell of Terrerouge? The clock of La Madone? Never had their sound reached as far as this.

The clock of Roquefort?

The bridge—yes. He was not surprised to find the bridge. He had known they would build it while he was away. Men were like that, big strong men who did not know what to do with their big strong hands except all the time to build, to build without pausing to ponder whether it was a good thing to do or a better thing if left undone—men who thought with their hands. But the clock? The old clock of Roquefort striking the hours? They had set it going again in its rusty little crown-like iron cage. But for what? For what?

He listened and counted the strokes. Six. Seven. The night wind blew sharp and cold down the Varouse valley from the snow- and ice-bound land of Vargelannes, a December wind smelling sharply of frost-bitten pinewoods, of hard-frozen moss and snow-covered forest turf. Keen-edged, knife-sharp, it tossed about his head. Below him the river roared under the bridge and off across the darkness, glistening, luminous, a green moonlight dancing on its toppling surf, casting flakes of wet, ice-cold foam on to the bridge and between his feet, where they would sit, like monsters of the night, wet with glowing eyes and burst and vanish.

Yet more closely the Centurion put his ear to the wind, listening amid the whistling winter's uproar. But there were no more strokes. The last one fluttered about for a short moment, high-pitched and lamenting, until the wind and the river tore it away and carried it off into the night. No more. Stillness. The sound of the river. The sound of the wind. Seven o'clock at night.

Time had begun again.

For a moment he hesitated halfway across the bridge. He stole a glance backwards at the way he had come through the evening which darkness had now devoured, and then looked upwards towards the rock whither he had meant to return. The cold of many nights sat in his body. He felt it press round his old heart in his old body, wet and clammy and, like fungus, rotting away his heart. Time, his beating wet heart seemed to say, time strikes all the time. It was no use pretending it didn't.

Suddenly he turned sharply. There was a rustle at his back, the

snapping sound of a twig, of pebbles set rolling, and then the noise of footsteps. He pressed himself closely against the wooden railing of the bridge and looked. Some one was coming down the ravine towards the bridge. A shadow emerged from the fringe of the wood. It halted, paused, then made another few steps. Through the whistling wind the Centurion heard the whisper of voices. The shadow, for a moment, had split in two? now it merged again into one. They were two people, a man and a woman. The man walked with difficulty? the woman supported him. Now they had reached the far end of the bridge.

For one anxious moment the Centurion waited. He felt trapped. He watched. But they were not coming towards him. They were sitting down at the foot of the bridge, they were resting. The Centurion turned and fled up the Bourgade.

5

THE COLD, THE wetness and clammy humidity, the noise and turmoil of swirling water and knife-sharp wind dropped away behind him as the Centurion climbed the steep street. There was stillness between the two rows of ducked, low houses that sat square and squat on either side of the darkness. There was warmth, too, now, dryness brushing his hands and cheeks. And there was light.

A broad, blinding beam fell suddenly straight across his feet. With one quick side step he evaded it. Pressing himself hard against the dark corner of the house opposite, he stood still. He listened, his eyes gazing fixedly towards the open door whence emerged the bright shimmer. A man had pulled back from the door the heavy sack that covered it, holding it lifted sideways while he stood on his doorstep. He turned his head slightly towards those inside, a woman kneeling by the hearth, a half-grown boy sitting on a bench, whittling away at something with his pocket-knife. The man who held the sack said something in a dark, grating voice; the woman turned her head, nodded, and turned back. The boy did not lift his head. With his free hand the man struck a lighter and lit the half-burned end of a cigarette

that dangled from his lips, stepped back into the house, and let the sack drop back.

The Centurion slipped into the street again and on quick, nimble feet darted up the Bourgade. Then he stopped once more, hid in the darkness of an alleyway, hurried a little farther on, hid again, walked on.

Lights and voices were everywhere. A scarlet glow as from an open fire hung like a large flowering poppy in a window, dancing to the rhythm of a heavy hammer that fell at steady intervals on to a singing anvil. A silent woman stood on her dark doorstep, a ray of yellow light from the window opposite faintly lighting her round, full face. She wore a thick black shawl wrapped tightly round her shoulders. She waited. A man's voice sang raucously from a half-open window, gaily, drunkenly. A door opened here, another there. Fires in the fire-places for quick moments shed a warm glow across the cobblestones. A man came down the street, hands in pockets, feet slurring sleepily, opened a door, and disappeared. A man opened a door, stepped out, and, hands in pockets, leisurely walked up the street towards the square. Some one called out in a strange language. Some one scolded some one else unseen; a child suddenly screamed and ceased again as abruptly as he had begun. A dog barked. Another answered. A cock crowed. Another answered. Ah, the Centurion thought, the cocks of this country, they will not keep any hours. A cat called out across the roofs. All the cats of Roquefort answered.

A small boy was sitting on the stone doorstep of a house, his bare knees drawn up, trying to whistle on an empty wine bottle. It made a hollow, scaring noise. The Centurion tried to slip past.

'Hoy!' called the boy. 'Who are you?'

Surprised, the Centurion stopped and looked. He uttered a perplexed giggle but answered nothing.

'You can tell me who you are,' the boy said with harmless friendliness. 'You laugh like Augustin's grandfather. One would almost think you *are* Augustin's grandfather. But you aren't.' He stared at the little man closely. 'You are a stranger,' he added and picked up his bottle again.

'Don't blow on that bottle,' the Centurion said.

'Does it frighten you? It scares the dogs all right.'

'It doesn't frighten me a bit. It annoys me.'

'Augustin's dog runs howling down the street each time I blow it. Listen.'

'Stop blowing that bottle,' the Centurion demanded harshly.

The boy put it away. He put his elbows upon his knees and rested his face in his hands. Thus he looked at the little man, quietly and interestedly.

'I'm waiting for my mother,' he explained. 'Do you live here? I've never seen you here before.'

'I do indeed,' the Centurion answered. 'I was here before everybody else. Long before anybody.'

'Then you must be a very old man. You look like ages. How old are you?'

'Guess.' The Centurion grinned.

'Fifty years? A hundred?'

The Centurion grinned.

'Two hundred?'

The Centurion shrugged his shoulders.

'You don't know?' the boy asked.

'I've forgotten.'

'If you're as old as that you shouldn't be out in the street at this time of night. You should be in bed. Augustin's grandfather is ninety-two, and he always goes to bed when it gets dark.' The little man nodded but did not move. 'What have you got that leather satchel for? Anything in it?'

'Money,' the Centurion answered. He pressed the satchel which hung from his shoulder close to his body.

The boy laughed. 'Show me!' he demanded.

'Ssh,' the little man whispered, terrified. He peered round with great caution, then untied one of the straps, then the other, and finally opened the flap. The boy bent over and put his head in.

'*Sacré!*' he gasped. 'May I take one out?'

Before the little man could help it he had already taken one and held it out on the palm of his hand. It was a large coin of a reddish golden hue. The boy looked at it gazingly but suddenly burst into mocking laughter.

'Money?' He tossed the coin into the darkness and caught it again

in his hand. 'Do you think this is money? Try to buy something with it.'

'Be quiet,' the Centurion rasped. 'I never buy anything.'

'Look,' the boy said with sudden seriousness. 'This is no money. Money is like this.' Digging into his trouser pocket, he brought out a dark *deux sous* copper piece. He held the two beside each other in his outstretched hand. 'You see? They've given you something wrong.'

'Ah?' the little man said in obvious consternation. '*Diable!*'

Footsteps approached from farther down the Bourgade.

'There comes my mother,' the boy said.

The old man gripped his satchel and quickly turned away.

'Ho ! Your coin !'

'Keep it !' a rasping, mocking voice came back from somewhere in the darkness.

The little man had disappeared. Rémy once more looked at the two coins in his hand, shook his head, and shoved them in his pocket. Then he picked up his bottle again and continued to blow on it.

The hollow, scaring sound that made the marrow in his bones shiver gradually drifted away behind him as the Centurion slipped up the street towards the square, a whisking unseen figure.

He looked into every window, followed every trail of light, gazed at every half-lit face, listened to all the sounds and voices. At last he reached the square. The low windows of the inn were brightly lit. There was laughter inside, men's laughter and women's laughter, too, the clinking of glasses, bright, shrill laughter again, and intermittently the sound of a mouth organ. Some one opened the door and stepped out. The Centurion ducked beneath the window. A large wooden sign, suspended from a wrought-iron arm above the door of the inn, was swaying to and fro in the wind, creaking softly on its hinges. It was an old sign repainted in bright colours, showing the head and shoulders of a black-haired, black-moustached gentleman in a red doublet and green-plumed hat, framed by the inscription 'Au Sieur de Roquefort.' The man who had just come out stopped beneath it, blew his nose, and then walked off. The Centurion came forward again. One of the low windows was not fully closed. With a slight, careful push he opened it a little wider. No one inside noticed. There

was a great noise, laughter, and agitated conversation. The Centurion pushed his head up as far as was wise, looked in, and listened.

Every one was laughing, most of all a stout old woman with silver hair and a black moustache who stood behind the zinc. Only two men were silent. They were sitting on a bench near the stove, one smiling good-humouredly at the crowd around him, the other biting his lips in angry disappointment. Clearly the general merriment was at their expense.

'So you say,' a short, stout fellow with a walrus beard and a shrivelled nose exclaimed, 'you say you've seen an aeroplane fall from the sky into the woods up in Vargelonnes?'

The angry man nodded.

'Well, I haven't,' the stout fellow went on amid laughter. 'Nor has anyone among the good and trustworthy citizens around us. Or have you?' A roar of laughter answered his question.

'But I have!' the angry man insisted.

'Well, and who else?' asked a young man with a red scarf who, until this moment, had been quietly playing his mouth organ in the corner.

'Yes, who else?' the short fellow repeated. 'Who was with you, Napoleone, when this occurrence produced itself?'

The angry man bit his upper lip.

'My brother Antonio,' he murmured.

At the sound of his name the good-humoured man by his side looked round and smiled. Then he took a gulp from his tumbler.

'And has your brother Antonio seen it? Have you seen an aeroplane fall down into the wood this afternoon, Antonio?'

The man called Antonio smiled, then gave a shrug and shook his head, whereafter he returned to his tumbler. This brought the angry man Napoleone to his feet.

'But he never sees anything!' he protested. 'Because he never notices anything, that doesn't prove that I'm blind. If the very moon fell into his bedroom he wouldn't notice it and think it was a dream. If——'

He obviously felt that the company was beyond argument. His face filled with disgust; he sat down abruptly, angrily snatched his brother's tumbler, and emptied it with one gulp. Then he pushed it on to the zinc.

The grey-haired woman with the moustache behind the counter smiled at him maliciously and filled it again from a large jug.

'There you are, my friend,' she said, passing the tumbler back across the zinc. 'This one is on the house for your very good story.'

There was giggling and laughter among the company.

'And now tell us some more, Napoléon Bonpère, of what has occurred in your rare and fruitful Italian imagination.'

This time the laughter broke off before it really began. A door at the back of the room was opened, and a tall, very heavy woman appeared in its frame.

'Evening, La Mère,' some one said.

'Good evening, the company,' the fat woman answered. She looked round. 'Janine not here?' she asked. 'Anyone seen Janine?'

The company shook their heads.

'The boy's about,' some one suggested.

'I know,' La Mère said. 'I'm asking myself where she can be. But she isn't here.' She half turned to the door again. 'Well, and what was the big joke and laughter, Archambault?'

The stout fellow named Archambault threw up his hands in mock despair.

'Oh,' he said, 'just another of those Italian brigand's stories. This here Napoleone says this afternoon while he was cutting reeds by the river with his brother he saw a large bird or aeroplane circle above his head and then suddenly fall into the woods, up in Vargelonnes, and vanish without a trace.'

'A large bird or what?'

'Aeroplane,' Napoléon repeated disgustedly from his place on the bench. 'A machine that flies. With a motor. It makes a noise.'

'I know,' La Mère said. 'And you say you've seen it, Napoléon?'

'I have,' the Italian grumbled. 'But these citizens here say it isn't true because no one else has.'

All eyes werè now on the fat woman, and fresh giggling already began to rise in the corners.

'But it's quite true,' La Mère said. 'I saw it, too, coming up from the bakehouse. An aeroplane, you say? I was asking myself what it could have been.'

The Centurion beneath the window heard and saw no more. There

were sudden footsteps behind him, which slowly, draggingly, came across the square. He dropped on to his knees and out of sight. A moment later the window above him was shut with a bang. But he didn't notice it. He saw two shadows walk slowly, painfully, across the square and recognized them as the ones that had chased him away from the bridge. The boy who had been whistling on the bottle followed them at a short distance. All three disappeared in a small house almost opposite his own. A moment later the light of a candle appeared in its window.

The door of the inn opened, and the tall fat woman came out. With a strangely slurring step she walked across the square. When she noticed the light in the window of the little house she paused for a moment but then passed on without looking in and entered the house next door.

The Centurion waited for a while. At the inn the laughter had ceased, the talk grown quieter. The mouth organ played. Everything in the square lay still. The Centurion crept forward, whisked across the square, and hid beneath the faintly lit window. Some one had taken the candle away from the window sill. Presently he straightened himself up and looked inside.

It was the kitchen. A low fire was burning in the open hearth, and by its side, on a stool, sat the small boy, sleepily stirring something in a pot. The candle stood in a saucer on the broad ledge of the fireplace. There was no one else in the kitchen.

After a while the inner door opened and the woman appeared. Standing on the threshold, she beckoned the boy to come over, then put her finger to her lips, thus bidding him to be quiet. She was a young woman of not more than twenty-four and of a restless and irritating beauty. Her hands fluttered a little as she spoke to the boy; there was a curious, frightened twitch round her lips. But in her eyes there was a steady, almost resolute light. The little boy evaded their look. He nodded to what he was told, went to the door, and left the house. The Centurion ducked quickly and felt the boy pass him closely in the darkness as he hurried down a side lane. After he had disappeared the Centurion looked again, but the woman had returned to the bedroom. The kitchen lay deserted.

The Centurion slipped round to the side. In the bedroom window there was light too. It was a poorly furnished room, with a single bedstead, some crudely plaited reed matting on the stone floor, a single chair, some woman's clothes hung up on half a dozen nails in the wall. A burning candle, fitted into a bottle, stood on an upturned box near the head of the bed. The man who lay stretched out on the bed, covered with a blanket, had his eyes closed and looked quite dead. The woman sitting by his side on the chair watched his face. Now and then she would grasp his hand for a moment, hold it in hers, and put it back on the blanket. Her lips moved; she seemed to say something, but the man's face remained motionless. The window was closed, and the Centurion could hear nothing. He pressed his eyes close to the glass and studied the man's face. It was a face one would not easily forget.

Suddenly there were steps in the lane, and the boy came hurrying back. He was followed by a very tall man who, though limping slightly on a walking-stick, made gigantic strides. They entered the house, and a moment later the man came into the bedroom. Still the window remained closed, and the Centurion could not hear what was spoken. The tall man, obviously without many questions, immediately set to work awakening the dead man. He pulled a flask from his pocket and pressed it to the dead man's lips. The woman brought water in a bowl, and he sprinkled the dead man's forehead. The dead man stirred and then awoke. He had an absent but happy and content look in his eyes. The tall man spoke to him while the woman kept in the background. They had difficulty in understanding each other, and the reawakened man several times was on the verge of falling dead again. Each time the tall man rescued him with his bottle. Then the tall man began to undress him, examined his right arm and shoulder which seemed to cause the other man considerable pain. Finally the tall man bandaged him up, and when he had finished the man on the bed was dead again. This time the tall man went to the window and pushed it wide open. The Centurion narrowly missed being knocked off his perch. He let himself drop to the ground. Now he could only hear but not see what went on.

'There,' the tall man said. He had a voice like a saw. 'He's back again. This time he'll stay, I think.'

'You've saved him,' the woman said.

'He saved himself. Look after him.'

'I shall. And——'

'To-morrow,' the man said. 'Don't worry. Tell him not to worry.'

'Yes,' the woman's voice breathed. 'Yes.'

The tall man left the house, this time alone. For one short second the Centurion peered through the open window. The young woman stood at the foot of the bed, smiling.

'I've taken your bed,' the wounded man said. 'Where will you sleep?'

She smiled, and her smile spread over her face like the petals of a flower opening in the stillness of the night.

'I'll sleep,' she answered. 'Don't worry.'

The Centurion, suddenly and inexplicably frightened, dropped on his feet and hurried away. At the end of the lane he saw the tall man turn the corner. On tip-toe he followed him to his house.

It was King Francis' house.

The Centurion realized it with a shudder. The tall man entered it, and a moment later the soft yellow shimmer of a lamp fell from its bow window out on the narrow terrace and the parapet. It cast the Centurion's shadow, dwarfed and grotesquely twisted, in rigid blackness upon the sombre house wall opposite. For a second the old man stared at it, a small bent figure on stiff legs, a sharp, knife-edged mouth, a beak-like nose, and pointed, jutting chin—himself. He raised his hands, spread his fingers, watched. Then suddenly, terrified by his own gestures, he turned and, tucked away in the shadow of the parapet, approached the window. The light fell softly and evenly. Now he stood so close that he felt the thick ivy rustle against his stiff leather jacket. He was a short man, and his arms did not reach the window. Cautiously his hands crept up the wall until they felt the rough edge of the stone sill under the foliage. He gripped it firmly and pulled himself up.

A large, square trestle table stood across the window. A chair was pulled up on each of its four sides. Three chairs were empty, but on the fourth, facing the window, sat the man. His big feet, clad in red canvas *espadrilles*, protruded a long way on the other side of the

table, but he sat with his back bent and his head lowered between his drawn-up bony shoulders. He wore a dark blue canvas coat buttoned half-way up and a red scarf tied sideways in a knot round his long turkey throat. Books were piled up, books open and closed, to his right and left. Papers were strewn between them all over the table. The soft yellow light came from an oil lamp standing before him on the table, half hiding the man's lowered head. The Centurion could not see his face.

At last the man lifted his head. He looked straight towards the window and through it, in a searching, dream-like gaze, and then suddenly gave a couple of quick nods and smiled, a friendly, wistful, knowing smile. A smile that seemed to say, No fear, my man, I have seen you all this time.

With a rustle like a blackbird falling from a branch in its dream, the Centurion dropped through the ivy dead on his feet and ran away. His shadow on swift bent legs ran with him across the wall as far as the corner. There it stumbled, fell, and gave up. The Centurion ran on towards his house. Behind the window of the inn the mouth organ was still playing. But most of the lights had gone out, and no one saw him.

Later, as the bell was halfway through tolling midnight, Rousset Barthélemy opened his door and stepped out to empty a bucket of dishwater.

The square lay in darkness. The lights were out. The noise and music at the Sieur de Roquefort had ceased at last. The Italians, who for some inexplicable reason had suddenly decided to get drunk and crown their drunkenness with a fight, had finally been persuaded to go home and to bed. A clouded moon stood above the church, shedding a pale and unsure light over the white statue of Our Lady of Roquefort which stood, small and fragile, in a niche above the porch. Rousset put down the bucket beside him and, pushing his hands in his trouser pockets, leaned his shoulder against the door. He drew a deep breath and spat into the square. Then he looked up and watched the moon.

The bell fell silent. Now in the sudden stillness the iron cage silhouetted against the milky pallor of the moonlight looked more than

ever like a crown, so still and full of grace. The clouds, long and thin and white, like transparent trails of tattered veil, swam past the moon in an endless, silent procession. Rousset watched them come and go. They grew longer and thinner and ever more tattered and then ceased to come. The last of them, no more than a wisp of white smoke, sailed past and away, and then the full white light streamed like liquid over the square and the roofs.

'Hey—Barthélemy!' a voice whispered from the other side.

It gave Rousset a jolt. He peered into the darkness.

'Ah, it's you. When did you come?'

'To-night,' whispered the Centurion. 'Come over so that I can talk to you. I must ask you many questions.'

For a moment Rousset felt in a haze. Was it that time had stood still? To-night and that other night when he had first come up to the square of the deserted city and had seen the old man sitting on his three-legged stool in front of his house, were they different nights or one and the same? He went over. The Centurion had not changed. His rutted face, overgrown with white, fluffy beard, his leather boots and wrinkled leather trousers, his claw-like hands folded on his knees, they were the same.

'Salute, the Centurion,' he said cheerfully.

'So you remember my name?'

'Yes,' Rousset answered. 'I remember your name. A man who came some time ago said it meant the leader of a hundred men. He asked, "Has he got a hundred men and where are they?" Is it true?'

'It is true.' The Centurion nodded solemnly. 'I have called them to meet me here to-night. I am here only for a short while. I have little time to waste.'

'Where are you off to?'

'On a mission. A mission of armed investigation and inquiry. Things are not as quiet as they look. Neither here nor elsewhere. One is apt to deceive oneself.'

His small pin-point eyes ran swiftly over the big man who stood before him, legs slightly apart, hands in his trouser pockets. 'And who was the man? How did he know?'

'A tall man with a wooden face.'

The Centurion's mouth twitched; his nose jerked upward with the pecking movement of a bird's beak.

'Ah, that one,' he said sharply and then, with a swift, cutting gesture of his hand, added: 'I don't want to talk about him. Sit down.'

Rousset sat down on the cobblestones. It occurred to him that the pavement was cold and moist from the falling hoarfrost and that it was altogether a stupid thing to do, but it did not worry him.

'First about the bridge,' the Centurion now said gravely. His voice was stern, and its admonishing tone frightened and at the same time amused Rousset. 'I told you about the bridge.'

'Yes. We built it last year,' he answered. 'My sons and I and some other men who helped us. It is a good bridge.'

'It may not be as good as you think. But that is your affair. I will forget about it. Next about the clock. Some one set it going again. Who did it?'

'Archambault, the blacksmith. Did it frighten you?'

'No,' the Centurion scoffed indignantly. 'I've heard it before. It merely annoys me, but it may hurt you. Not everything that makes a noise is good. Clocks call things and people one may not want to come. But that is your affair. I will forget about it. Next about the people. I told you about the people. I advised you. You did not listen.'

'I listened,' Rousset answered. 'But I have my own mind. As about the bridge. Besides, people do what they like, bridge or no bridge, clock or no clock. They decide to come, so they come. They decide to go, so they go. There were people here before. Now there are people here again.'

The more he spoke in this deliberate manner, the more it amused him to watch growing exasperation perplex the Centurion's wrinkled leather features.

'Who owns this place?' the Centurion finally snapped.

'The people,' Rousset answered calmly.

The Centurion jumped from his stool.

'And who is the Captain of the Ship?' he rasped.

'Don't worry yourself,' Rousset answered. 'Sit down.'

The little man sat down again. He sighed and, folding his hands round his knees, looked greatly relieved and also, in his inscrutable way, thankful.

'Tell me about the people,' he asked. 'Where did you find them?'

'I didn't look for them,' Rousset answered. 'They came. Some from one place, some from another, some from no place at all. Some from the valleys below, some from the mountains, others from elsewhere. No one told them to come. They just came, some for this reason, some for that. The reasons are of no importance. They are forgotten, but the people stay. One doesn't ask many questions. One knows their names, that's all. Some are good people; some are not so good. Some are kind and peaceful, some quarrelsome and a trifle mean, some reasonable, some unreasonable. Some work; some don't. It's of small importance. People sort themselves out without many questions being asked.'

'Yes,' the Centurion said gruffly. 'And some make a great noise at night.' He gave a tired, acquiescing shrug. 'All right. I will ask no more questions.'

His right hand reached under the stool but then, as if on second thought, abruptly withdrew again. What is he so fidgety about? Rousset wondered. He's shifting about on his stool as if he had ants in his trousers. And what is he hiding under his stool?

'Just one more,' the Centurion said nervously. His voice dropped to a whisper. 'That one below. When did he come back?'

'Come back?' Rousset asked. 'He came a few months ago, but he didn't come back. He came for the first time.'

'No, no.' The Centurion shook his head impatiently. 'That's what you think. Perhaps one day I shall tell you. It's a great and extraordinary secret.' Excitedly his hands kept pushing backwards and forwards over his knees. 'Do you talk to him often? What does he say?'

'We talk a little once in a while. He says nothing much.'

'Did he ever say he missed something?'

'No.'

'Nothing in his house? This or that thing?' The Centurion's voice trembled slightly. Looking at him, Rousset saw that despite all his perplexity the Centurion watched, from sharp and spying eyes, every word he, Rousset spoke. 'Tell me the truth,' he demanded.

'I've told you the truth. I don't know about this thing or that thing.' Rousset smiled at him and rose. 'I must turn in now. I'm cold and wet. I'll catch a sickness being out here talking to you.'

But the Centurion paid no attention.

'There's a mystery in this,' he murmured. 'And I don't mind telling you that it is bound to cause perplexity and even grave confusion. Important plans may have to be altered when unforeseen events occur. Such is the case. A very deep mystery. It is not easy to comprehend.'

'I don't understand a word of it,' Rousset said. 'And I don't think you mean me to.'

The Centurion looked up sharply.

'Did you tell me the truth? Swear!'

'Damn it, yes,' Rousset laughed. 'What's worrying you? Let's have a drink before we turn in. Where's that bottle of yours?'

Abruptly the Centurion shot up in a start as if from a sudden violent sting, a piercing look in his eyes, full of cold, hard suspicion.

'Bottle?' he demanded. 'I have no bottle.'

'Surely you have. The big black bottle with the fire wine. You didn't lose it, I hope.'

'Ah, that one,' the Centurion answered. 'I no longer have it.'

'Fancy,' Rousset said.

The Centurion now smiled at him, wizard-like and good-humouredly. 'Go to bed now, my friend,' he said.

'Good night,' Rousset answered humbly. 'Until to-morrow.'

'If I'm here,' the old man said with a chuckle.

He stretched his short, stocky legs, and his stiff leather trousers made a crunching noise.

'There's a great tiredness in me,' he said, hardly audible. 'A very great tiredness, Barthélemy. The years before me are a greater tiredness than the years behind me. The land grows vaster and vaster, the mountains higher and more difficult to climb, the valleys deeper and more difficult to cross. People become more difficult to find. I come and I go, but my journeys become ever longer, and there is a greater tiredness in going than in coming.'

He spoke so softly now, his face buried in his hands, that Rousset could hardly hear him.

'Why don't you stay?' he asked quietly.

There was no answer from the Centurion. His face had become deeply buried in his hands. The white weed with its fluffy flower

that grew on his earthen hands seemed to have grown beyond them and over his head and face. His hair and beard had grown into each other and into the velvety fluff that grew from his hands. They were all one, and in his deep-sunken silence the Centurion was so grown over and still that Rousset believed him asleep. In the soft white moonlight he resembled an old and huddled tree covered with moss and breathing the faint, soft breath of the night.

Janine, by the flickering candlelight behind the window of her kitchen, saw big Rousset Barthélemy walk across the square to his house. He picked up his bucket on the doorstep and silently slipped through his door.

The light had begun to fade. A long straggling cloud was sailing past the moon. Janine blew out the candle. Cold night air came in through the half-open window and made her shiver in her thin night-shirt. She felt the cold of the night numb her feet that stood naked on the bare stone floor; she felt it rise from her toes through her legs and thighs up into her body and make it shiver. Yet she could not bring herself to turn away. The long, strange, unbelievable day of happenings was not yet at its end. There was still something waiting to come, and it was something of which her mind knew nothing. Her eyes, her hands, her trembling body knew it and kept her waiting in exhausted suspense.

Behind her back she felt her life. Not the years that had passed. They were before her, spread out into the night, and if she cared she could trace them across the hills and down the valleys, along paths wide and narrow, familiar and half forgotten, past villages and hamlets, past faces and bodies, year by year. Behind her back, however, stood the life that waited; it had suddenly come upon her and filled all space, a sweeping, rushing embrace from behind that sent a hot chill up her neck. She dared not turn to face it and flung out her arms towards it for fear it might not be there; it might be gone, as gone it had been often before. I am living backwards, she thought, and the very queerness of the thought made her wonder how it could have entered her mind. I am living backwards, and that is the sickness of my heart. My past that lies so visibly, so graspable, before me keeps for ever pressing against me, and I recede, step by step, towards the

large embrace waiting behind me. Ah, she thought, pressing her palms to her bursting temples, for once to come to rest.

Suddenly there was clearness again in her heart and mind. She gazed out into the square and at once noticed the huddled form in front of the old house opposite. It was a low, crouched, knobby thing, almost shapeless in the milky uncertainty of the ebbing light, and it was covered with a pale flowering moss. A tree or a man—she was not sure. But when the moon once more emerged from behind its straggling veils, shedding its full light over the square, she saw it was a man, asleep on his stool, his bearded face buried in his hands, motionless, dead. Her hands still held on to the window sill. But her body withdrew a little.

He was not dead. In utter stillness the night hung suspended about his sleep. Now and then Janine thought she heard him breathe faintly, thought she saw him stir, and yet the longer she watched, the more movement seemed to be about his stillness, the more silent, undiscernible change about his seemingly immutable deadness. Yes, he changed under her very eyes. Had he not at first sight looked a very ordinary little old man, dressed in odd bits of clothes; cracked old leather boots, wrinkled old leather jacket, odd crumpled leather trousers, and nothing more, the kind of homeless, companionless old one you meet here and there, resting by the well in the shade of the olive trees? And was there not now change about him, curious, arresting change?

There was. She noticed suddenly the large starry horseman's spurs on his boots that were shining in the moonlight like bright silver and had not shone a moment ago because they had not been there. She saw his strange garment change colour, from an earthen brownish gray into bright mustard yellow. She saw him stir in his sleep, saw him lift his head from his palms and stretch his arms. She saw his coat sleeves grow wide and curiously puffy; she saw that strange long slashes, as if cut by a knife, appeared along their lengths, showing brightly coloured insides, scarlet, green, and blue. He stretched his stiff old legs and, doing so, lifted a slim long sword in a silver scabbard and with a chiselled hilt that had been resting on his knees. Had it been there before? The pair of large white gauntlets that lay in cross-hand fashion by his feet had surely not, nor had the wide-brimmed plumed hat, wearily discarded.

Janine bent over the low window into the chilling night, gazing, listening. The little horseman was awake. He was sitting up, no longer weary and exhausted, but keen and alert as he, too, seemed to listen intently into the night. Now his bearded face was raised towards the sky. His right hand, half lifted from his knee, held the neck of a fantastically shaped black-bellied bottle while his left, resting on his knee, clasped its silver stopper. And before him on the cobblestones, looking fixedly up at him, sat a big black and tailless cat that surely had not been there before and had never yet been seen at Roquefort.

And now the rider called.

'Ho, Bourriboule!' he called into the wind, and the cat pricked up her ears. 'Ho, Bourriboule!' he called again, more challenging, more drunkenly.

His call echoed back from the sleeping houses, and with it came new sounds. Janine lifted her head.

A night breeze had risen. It hummed with a high voice across the roofs of the city. A horse, unseen, neighed somewhere quite near. Another answered. A hundred hooves now stamped the ground in fettered impatience. Sparks flew up from the cobbled pavement. A trumpet blew far in the distant hills, but its sound caught itself in the bell cage of the church and sent the bell chiming, softly at first, then louder and louder. The rider rose from his seat. He lifted the bottle to his lips and took a long draught. He hooked his sword into his belt. The noise of heavy feet approached from the dark side streets and alleyways; the sound of a hundred men was everywhere, the jingling of spurs, the clatter of arms hastily gathered. The huge portal of the ancient citadel was suddenly flung wide open; lights flashed inside the black vastness of its hall and vaults; men appeared on the balustrade; horses were led out, saddled and bridled for urgent departure; pennons and streamers were fluttering in the night wind from the shimmering spear-headed tops of a forest of lances. The square, the city were full of men, full of horses, full of sound and light that blinked and glanced and hurried hither and thither from a hundred storm lanterns. And not only the earth, the square, the alleys, and passages of the city were filled with their rising clamour. The sky above them was full as well. The sound of galloping racing

horses, neighing wildly, their nostrils bent against the cloudy night, their manes streaming like white trails of cloud, their breath steaming like the mist of dawn, swept past above the roofs through the clangorous sky.

And then? Janine did not know. She saw the little old rider mount his horse, wearing his plumed hat, his white gauntlets gripping the reins; she saw him lift his arm in salute, and then? Did she see him ride off at the head of his column of a hundred horsemen come from nowhere? Did she really see him depart, and how and whither? Across the square and away? Or away with the thundering legion above that swept along through the clouds, black and silver shadows, away on the storm into space?

She did not know. Time swept past her in a great flooding stream of chiming, neighing, whinnying thunder. Onwards and forwards, it seemed to call and dragged and pulled her and swept her with it, and her eyes grew blind with tears and tearing expectancy. Onwards and forwards, or was it backwards, away, away?—she did not know. Her throat was breathless with tears and jubilation, with cries and laughter that tore her along; tear-veiled eyes followed the shadows of the horsemen, but her heart she still felt beating under her trembling hands that were pressed close to her breast. The noise and thunder abated. Giddily she leaned back her head and felt that, were she to let her hands go from the window sill, she would, this time, not fall. She would be caught and received and borne away. She closed her eyes. The last chime ebbed away plaintively with the night wind, and stillness and quiet descended again over the roofs of the dormant city.

The doors of the citadel were closed again and looked as if they had never moved on their rusty bolts and hinges. The rider had gone. But his strange little three-legged stool still stood on the pavement in front of his deserted house, and on it sat the inexplicable tailless cat, black with fiery eyes, bathed in tender moonlight. A moment later, when Janine looked once more, they, too, stool and cat, had disappeared.

She turned back, and in the dimness of the midnight haze the features of the kitchen seemed remote and unfamiliar. She had to force herself into remembering her whereabouts, and there was aching pain in this compulsion. She perceived the huddled figure of her small

son who lay curled up under his blankets on his mattress in front of the fireplace, asleep. His little hand, resting beside his face on the pillow, was clenched into a stubborn fist, as if it were holding something so precious that he would not yield it even in his dream.

She looked at him and knew she was looking with hazy, absent eyes. There was the same remoteness about him, the same painful difficulty in recognizing the intimate and familiar. His presence, asleep in front of the hearth, was unexplained and disconnected. I am passing; I am on my way, she thought, and at the same time was conscious of her own harshness. She tried to remember his father and felt revulsion at having to try to remember him whom she had seen only once and feared so mortally that she could have strangled him in his embrace. She passed.

The chamber door stood ajar and opened soundlessly when she entered. The room was filled with white, floating light, and she felt it rise like a tepid sea about her body.

'Have you been awake all this time?' she asked.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I've been waiting.'

She approached the bed and stretched out a timid hand.

'Did the pain keep you awake?'

'No,' he answered. 'My dreams.'

Now his hand, timid too, fearful for a moment of unsure rejection, helped her across the shallows. Vaguely as she felt her way towards him she realized her nameless tiredness—the tiredness of rest after years of journey, across distances it had taken her centuries to traverse. She smiled as she felt her body walk away from her into sleep.

6

WHEN SHE WOKE at first light Janine found her head resting in the mould of his elbow, and her face slipped close to his. He was still soundly asleep; his warm, steady breath wafted in little waves over her eyes and forehead, and for a moment she let herself sink back into the silence of his caress. This moment was still part of the night; the hour of tinal blushing awakening was not yet.

Behind her closed, half-dreaming eyes she realized that she had forgotten his name. Perhaps she had never known it. She had also forgotten most of his face, and what she remembered was not more than a fleeting smile, disconnected features here and there, and even they dissolved as her thoughts approached them. She had lost his voice because she had forgotten the words he had spoken to her. What she knew of him was an image brought to her by the night. Now at sunrise, presently and in painful bewilderment, she would have to learn him again, or rather for the first time.

She opened her eyes a little and let them wander, slightly ashamed and guilty, over his dormant face. The cloudy thickness of early-winter dawn which filled the room still shrouded it in grey uncertainty, and loving curiosity, under her held breath, almost tempted her trembling finger softly to retrace his features as if they were the contours of a forbidden picture.

She wondered about his age, but his face gave no answer. At one moment it seemed to know much, more even than it cared to know. At another it knew little, and this it seemed ready to forget. It had lived, she imagined, more than a full man's life, and yet beneath the trace of lost illusion, beneath the mocking twitch of irony round his lips, boyhood's credulity and fanciful laughter seemed to wait. The hard and the tender, the sombre and the serene were inseparably married, and she understood none of it. Knowing that she did not, she felt pity for him and sank back into sleep.

The chimes of a bell, clanging away deep in his dream, carried him up, step by step, until they rang loudly in his ears and he opened his eyes. At that moment they stopped, but he caught their last echo and knew that he had not dreamed them. He knew at once where he was. Numberless nights spent haply in unknown places and under unchosen roofs had taught him that. He was less sure of the details of how he had got here. He remembered vaguely an endless descent through a wood and along a river, then a bridge where he had rested, a few more tumbling steps up a steeply rising street, and thereafter he lost his own trace. The next thing was a tall man with the face of a wood-carved punchinello who bandaged his shoulder. This man would be able to tell him what he wanted to know. From there onwards he remembered everything. The tenderness of her warm breath that

floated in little waves over his face, her soft neck resting gently in his elbow, and the strands of her sleeping hair spread over his outstretched arm and hand reassured him that he remembered no dream. He moved cautiously and, without waking her, pressed a gentle little kiss on her temple. He wished he could remember her name.

He lay facing the window. The small, bare room was still hung with the drifting veils of grey dawn, but outside, in what appeared a fair-sized square, daylight was complete. He could not see the square fully, only a corner of it; the rest was hidden by the wall of a house. But he saw a fountain and two steps leading up to it and behind it a low curved balustrade that seemed to lead up to a porch. Beyond he divined a hand's breadth of thick, cloudy winter sky and the summit of a mountain. It was very cold. The sun had not yet broken through, and it looked doubtful whether it ever would this day. Long blasts of gushing wind swept into the square at regular intervals and sent an unfastened window clattering. As he lay watching and pondering a couple of dogs came wandering round the corner, halted at the fountain, and lapped up the few drops they found in the basin. A ruffled hen suddenly appeared on the balustrade, sent out a few sleepy cackles, but when the two dogs paid no attention it disappeared again. Now there were voices, a woman's talking to a child, the disconnected murmurings of a man. A window was slammed quite near by, a little later a key turned in a distant lock and a door opened. Steps were coming up the lane towards the square.

Two men passed beneath the window, talking.

'Wait,' one of them said as they were rounding the corner. 'I've forgotten to piss. Now it urges me.'

'Please yourself,' said the other one. 'We're in no hurry.'

They stopped at the corner and made water against the house wall. It took them a comfortable time, and they went on talking.

'Myself,' said the one man, 'if you ask me, I was surprised. I should have said it was a lie. Or, if you like, a story.'

'To me,' said the other one, 'it still sounds like a story. An aeroplane. Where should an aeroplane come from? The last time I saw an aeroplane was in the war. It was a double-decker, and we shot it down.'

They had obviously finished their business but did not walk on.

'That is not the question,' the first man said, striking his lighter,

which apparently refused to work. I am asking myself, "Where did it crash, and what happened to the man inside?"'

'That man would be dead.'

'That is to be assumed. And the wreck would not be found in years. Except, of course, by accident.'

'And a very big accident it would have to be,' the other man said, 'to find anything at all in the woods of Vargelonnes. Horses, cows, sheep have been lost in Vargelonnes and never found again. It is said of a man who once lived on the plateau that he went for kindling only half an hour away from his house and never found his way back. That's the sort of country it is.'

'That man may, of course, have been murdered. People used to be murdered off and on in Vargelonnes in the old days. It is a bloody country. There, now, I've got it.'

They had succeeded in lighting their cigarettes, and a stray wisp of smoke of a caporal came floating into the room. Steps were now coming towards the house from the other side.

'Ho, Modeste, Jaubert,' a deep voice called. 'Coming?'

'There's Archambault. Coming!' they answered and walked off.

He had understood almost every word. Though it was a strange, unknown language, something in it was uncannily familiar, and he felt curiously at home in it. It sounded like a distortion, a weird translation from another tongue which until two days ago had been his only language. Ah yes, he knew. The fishermen and peasants, the soldiers and tramps among whom he had lived for over two years on their shell-torn beaches, among the rubble of their ruined villages on their blood-soaked hills, they had spoken not so very differently.

Presently two other men appeared. He could see them clearly. They were busy at the fountain, one turning the handle and pumping, the other washing his face. They were arguing.

'All I'm saying,' the one who was pumping defended himself, 'is that it was unwise to hit the blacksmith in the face.'

'He insulted me,' said the man who was washing his face.

'He was drunk. And so were you.'

'And yourself.'

'I'm not denying it. But I did not hit the blacksmith.'

'You didn't hit him because he didn't insult you.'

'I believe you insulted him first,' said the man who was turning the handle. 'You said——'

'I know what I said. I wish I had never seen the cursed aeroplane. I wish I were always as wrong as other people. I should have had an easier life.'

'Now that you've hit the blacksmith we have an enemy,' the man at the pump handle said. 'That worries me. I was happy in this place. Now you've started a prejudice.'

'I started nothing. He did.'

The other man let the pump handle go.

'I don't believe in argument,' he said resignedly. 'I merely remember what happened at Albèze. There you hit the baker, and that started it. Now pump for me.'

'The hell I will,' the other man said.

He spat on the ground and walked off. The man who was left behind stared sadly at his shoes and then with his spread fingers began to comb his thick, matted black hair. Presently a flock of children appeared and surrounded him.

'Dino,' the man said, 'pump a little water for your father.'

The eldest boy did as he was told.

'And,' said the man, 'don't go in your uncle Napoléon's way to-day. He is angry with me.'

The children, who had red frozen faces and running noses, nodded understandingly. After a while they all went away.

No, he thought. I cannot stay in this place, wherever it is. If they have no police now they will sooner or later go out and fetch them. There are Italians about, and the stupider they are, the more dangerous. I must move on. I must move on very soon. He gazed fixedly out into the square, a thick lump in his throat. Gently, cautiously, as he gazed his hand stroked the sleeping face by his side. If I stole out now and left, he thought vaguely, she would think, perhaps, that it was all a dream. He fell asleep again.

When he woke for the second time the sun was still not out, but the old town outside had come to full life. The place beside him in the bed was empty. But in front of the bed, a serious, considered look in his eyes, stood the boy.

'How goes it?' he asked without a smile.

'It goes,' the soldier answered.

From the kitchen, behind the half-open door, came the sound of a voice, humming softly, serene and sorrowless.

He felt deeply ashamed.

'I'm just making the coffee,' Janine said. 'Come in.'

Fortescue, who stood in the door, dressed in his old stained and singed brown corduroy trousers, red scarf, and chequered tweed coat, stepped into the kitchen. The short walk up the lane through the cold wind had reddened his face and driven little tears into his eyes. He wiped his face with a large handkerchief.

'You'll make me a cup too,' he said.

'Two,' Janine said.

'Yes, two,' he answered, breathing into his hands and then rubbing them in front of the fire. 'Always two. Hallo, soldier. How are you mending?'

'All right, I think. You fixed me up well.'

He was sitting on the bench behind the table in the corner, his bandaged shoulder resting against the wall.

'I'm calling you soldier because I don't know your name.'

'Godefroy,' the soldier answered.

Janine, who stood between the two men, her face turned towards the bright fire that was burning in the hearth, blushed deeply. It was as if the fire suddenly sprang into her face and set it alight. It amused Fortescue to watch the two. How her face has come alive, he thought. There are a hundred lives in it now where there used to be barely one, and that one half buried.

She poured the hot coffee into three earthenware bowls.

'He's a little timid,' she said, the steam clouding her face; 'he doesn't want to ask. How long will it take?'

'His shoulder?' Fortescue answered, and Godefroy thought, How odd, he's talking to her as if I were not in the room. 'A few days, I should say, but he mustn't move about too much. He's cracked his collar-bone and sprained his shoulder joint. I'm surprised he didn't break it.'

'So am I,' Godefroy said from his corner. 'Because I broke it before, several times. It keeps breaking all the time.'

'How's that?' Fortescue asked, looking vaguely in his direction.

'Oh—accidents of war. Once both wheels of a motor cycle ran over it. Then a pack-horse with two cases of ammunition stepped on it. Then I broke it through my own fault, falling with a sub-machine gun. I didn't know it, and it knocked me right over.'

Fortescue nodded and gave him a friendly smile which did not encourage him. He didn't really want to know, Godefroy reflected, and I wonder whether he knows what war it is I am talking about.

'Are you a doctor?' he asked modestly.

'In a way.' The Englishman nodded. 'Injured soldiers, at any rate, are nothing new to me.'

He pulled up a chair, and then there was silence in the kitchen. The crackle of the fire in the hearth was the only sound. Godefroy glanced out of the window. The greyness had not lifted. The wind that came down from the mountains seemed to increase in intensity, and it looked as if it might begin to rain at any moment. Looking round, Godefroy noticed that the boy was no longer there. He had not seen him leave.

'The coffee,' a quiet voice said by his side.

It was a fairly large bowl and not easy to hold with one hand. Janine and Fortescue held theirs with both hands, and slowly and in silence they sipped the hot drink, the two men seated opposite each other at the table, Janine standing, her back turned to the fire. The dancing flames seemed to leap all round her; their light sprang up and down her bare arms, her throat, and flushed cheeks.

'I'm asking myself,' Fortescue said, 'if that wind is already the mistral. It would be early.'

'It sounds like it. But before Christmas?'

She put down her bowl and, taking Godefroy's from his outstretched hand, cleared away the crockery.

'I'll go down to the Goulette now,' she said.

Godefroy remembered the scarf when he now saw her tying it over her hair with a knot under her chin. She's wearing it round her head, he thought, the scarf that saved my blessed shoulder; she's wearing it round her hair, and I should have liked to tie it for her. He swallowed a lump as he saw her go to the door.

'Now you talk,' she whispered, nodding to him. Then she left.

His eyes followed her shadow as it passed under the window, the scarf fluttering in the gathering wind. The fire in the hearth, it seemed to him, had suddenly sunk very low. Fortescue looked at him attentively but without curiosity.

'This war,' the man in the chequered coat said at length, 'I suppose it is over?'

'It will be, any day now.'

'Who won?'

'The others.'

Fortescue nodded. 'I can understand your feelings,' he said. 'In a sort of way.' He looked at him with serious, wondering eyes for a seemingly endless time and finally turned them away. 'One day you must tell me something about all this. It puzzles one when one hasn't seen a newspaper for over a year.' He paused again, gazing towards the window. 'But at least I can understand your feelings.'

Godefroy gave himself a slight jerk. He sat up and placed his sound hand before him on the table, as if to collect his thoughts and hold them firmly. But it was a strangely helpless gesture. He felt that it would not achieve much.

'My feelings,' he answered awkwardly, 'have got very little to do with it. It is simply that I don't want to be caught by the French police, as so many others have been, and put in prison. I'm forty years old and—'

Why am I saying all this, he thought, and broke off. I should tell him how I got here and why I am afraid. That I tried to escape from a surrounded aerodrome in an Italian machine, back to our own lines, and that fighters came after me and chased me out to sea instead, and I had no choice but to fly on as long as my petrol lasted, and that it was thus that I flew out of the war. But it would perhaps not sound very real.

'Gendarmes,' Fortescue said instead. 'There aren't any.'

'So the girl'—Godefroy blushing corrected himself—'Janine tells me. It's hard to believe, though.'

'Oh, you can believe it. I've lived in these parts for almost twenty years, up and down the country within a hundred miles or so from this place, and in all that time I haven't discovered a trace of the authorities.'

He smiled and leaned back in his chair.

Nothing stirred in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. The fire whispered and crackled in the hearth, leaping up suddenly with a shooting red tongue, then dying down again peacefully. Outside the wind howled round the street corners and whirled up thin columns of dust in the middle of the square. Godefroy found it hard to keep his straying thoughts together. I am sitting here, he thought, as if I had never been anywhere else and known anything else since the beginning of time. He tried to think of the kitchen, of the square outside, the whole town as things strange and unreal, and found that, as he thought about them, it was they that made, gradually and imperceptibly, the world outside and the things that went before look odd, remote, unreal, and strange themselves.

But I *have* come from this war, he thought; only yesterday it was the only truly real thing that existed. Why, then, is it so hard to recall that great, bloody, heartbreaking struggle? It refused to respond to the calls of his mind, and it was not he who had left it. The war had gone away from him. It had walked away from him across hills and valleys, across plains and rivers beyond the farthest range of mountains, and behind the horizon it had sunk away into history. He tried, for a moment, to remember the noise of his engine, the roar of the guns, but there was silence in his ears. They had gone away. Instead he remembered the movement of Janine's hand as she cleared away the coffee bowls, a fragment of a gesture as she lifted her chin to tie the scarf, and in his ears there was the soft moaning sound of the door hinges and then the clicking of the lock.

'You'll have a good life here,' Fortescue said into the silence. 'Last night when I first saw you I thought you were a boy of twenty-two or so. Now I see you're a man. I think you'll have a good life.'

He rose from his seat and, planting his two fists on the table top, bent over slightly and looked Godefroy in the face.

'What is worrying you?' he asked.

'The wrecked plane,' Godefroy answered.

'No one will find that for a long time. Now the snow will soon come down from the plateau, and when it reaches the woods it makes them impassable. But, in any case, no one lives up there who would interest himself in it even if he found it.'

He straightened himself up and went over to the fireplace. He put a fresh log on the fire, and when he turned round again, now standing with his back to the fire, he looked awkward and apologetic.

'I said I could understand your feelings,' he said half aloud, 'and by saying that I didn't mean to hurt them.' He paused and, his hands folded behind his back, gazed at the floor and his shoes. 'It is because I don't think—although of course I cannot know—because I don't think you would have felt very different in case you had won through. I remember myself, at the end of the World War, and what you say makes me think of those days for the first time now in twenty years. We had won through then, and yet I felt so hurt and so—ashamed—that I couldn't face the prospect of going home. And I never went. I'm still hanging round. I imagined that I had nowhere to go. You actually have nowhere to go. Or have you?'

He looked up and vaguely gazed towards the other man.

'Besides, it makes no difference,' he murmured. 'You wouldn't do it to her. I for one shouldn't think much of you if you did. I should regret having wasted my precious brandy on you.'

Godefroy nodded. He was suddenly tired and weary and at the same time impatient of the irrelevance of the conversation. He knew that he no longer needed any reassurances and that what was being said no longer made any difference to what he was going to do. All he was waiting for now was the return of Janine. The long hour that had passed since she had left, the flickering light of the fire in the old kitchen, the wind-swept square outside, the grey light that swam in the windows of the old ducked houses opposite, the chiming of the church bell, the solitary steps on the cobblestone pavement now and then, they had quietly and irrevocably made his decision for him.

He raised himself and rested his chin in his palm.

'There's one thing I should like to know,' he said. 'The boy. Is there a father?'

Fortescue gave a shrug.

'How can I know? That's your affair, if anybody's.'

A few minutes later Janine returned, cheeks flushed from the wind, loose strands of hair fluttering from under her scarf. She had obviously hurried back and was a little out of breath. A sharp gush of wind blew with her into the kitchen and made the fire leap.

'Your house is ready,' she said to Fortescue. 'I had some trouble in getting the fire started because the wind is sitting right on top of your chimney pot. But it's burning now.'

She looked at Godefroy, happily and vaguely expectant, and then glanced at Fortescue.

'Is anything the matter?' Her voice was anxious. 'You haven't quarrelled?'

Fortescue smiled, tugging his imaginary beard.

'Oh no,' he answered lightly. 'We understand one another.'

Godefroy said nothing. In silence he watched her untie the scarf, fold it, and put it away. Presently, when he's gone, he thought, I shall put another log on the fire.

When he reached his house Fortescue found the boy waiting for him downstairs.

'Monsieur,' said Rémy, 'I want to ask you. Do you know the fluffy old man with the false money?'

'No,' answered the Englishman, taking off his coat. The fire was burning brightly, and the room was warmer than he liked it. 'What kind of money?'

The boy opened his fist and produced the coin.

'I meant to ask you last night. But then, over this business, I forgot.'

Fortescue cast a swift glance at the boy but said nothing. Unhurriedly he pulled a chair up to the fire, went for his pipe and tobacco, and finally sat down.

'Listen,' he said, beckoning the boy to come closer. He did not look at him but watched his own mighty thumb pressing the tobacco carefully into the pipe bowl. 'About what you call "this business." You're going to do me a service, eh? You're going to behave. Like a wise fellow. All right?'

The boy nodded.

'Now what is this story of yours?'

Leaning back, his long legs stretched stiffly away from him towards the fire, he examined the coin. It shone in a reddish copper hue. Rémy watched the gaunt man's face with intense excitement. Would he discover it? He could not tell. The man's features betrayed not a

twitch. They looked more wood-carved than ever, and his blue, piercing eyes seemed dead with attention.

‘How many did he have of these? Just this one?’

‘Oh no, hundreds,’ Rémy answered, still staring at his face. ‘A satchelful. But then he got frightened and ran away fast. Because I blew on my bottle. Is it good money?’

‘No. You can’t buy anything with it. Better leave it with me.’

The boy did not object. ‘He was a queer old fellow,’ he went on eagerly. ‘I’ve never seen him here before. Do you think he’s gone for good?’

Fortescue gave a shrug.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have frightened him. I should have stopped blowing on that bottle when he told me to. Would he then have stayed?’

‘One never knows,’ Fortescue answered, absent-mindedly turning the coin between his fingers.

He doesn’t see it, the boy thought disappointedly. He keeps looking and looking and doesn’t see it.

‘It’s—it’s funny, isn’t it?’ he burst out at last. ‘The man’s face on the coin.’

Fortescue turned round sharply.

‘What’s funny about it?’

‘He looks like you. Don’t you see? He resembles you. Only——

‘Only what?’

The boy blushed, and Fortescue found himself staring at the top of his ears which were turning a deep scarlet.

‘You’ve got no goatee like he has.’

Fortescue’s right hand, almost automatically, felt for his chin and then, with a gesture of annoyed futility, dropped back on the arm rest of the chair. His eyes returned to the coin. It was of pure gold and bore the name of Francis the Third, King of France, and his portrait and the year of its minting, almost four centuries ago. He looked at it for a long time. Having overcome his first shock, he began, after a while, to stroke his chin again and finally, with a sceptical smile, slipped the coin in his trouser pocket.

That evening the furious wind from the mountains began to settle, and after the soup it had almost died away. An unexpected, halting

silence followed, broken only now and then by the clanging of a window, the faint rattle of a door, as the last sporadic little bursts swished across the square, caught themselves in the alleys and under the vaults, and then petered out. Only the cold remained. As darkness fell and Rousset walked across the square towards the house a sniff told him that it had come to stay. It was not the cold of that first sharp and stinging chill at the beginning of winter which later gives way again to cool, metallic sunshine. This cold, massive and colourless, sat like a solid block in the square and noiselessly pressed against doors and windows.

'So it wasn't the mistral after all,' Rousset said. 'It would have surprised me.'

'It was the snow wind from the plateau,' Joannon said. 'When the snowfalls reach the edge of the plateau of Vargelonnes, and before they begin descending down the gorge of the Varouse, they send this long blast of wind ahead. It's well known to the woodcutters. It serves them as a warning that they must leave off and get out of the mountains if they don't want to be snowed under. It never lasts long.'

'How far down does it come?' La Mère asked.

'The snow? I've never seen it come down all the way. But I'd be surprised if to-morrow morning we shan't see the first white patches up in the woods.'

He was sitting on the brick step of the fireplace, his legs drawn up and hands folded round them, and his chin resting on his knees.

'How far up into Vargelonnes have you been?' Renée asked.

'Oh, not very far. About half-way across the plateau or so.'

'Did you never cross it and go beyond?' Rousset asked.

'Why should I? There isn't anything there. At one time, I daresay, there must have been people up there too. You run into one or two dead villages on your way up, but they must have been dead for a long time. Now the trees are living in the houses.'

'What do you mean?' asked the girl. 'The trees?'

The woodsman nodded. 'Of course one doesn't know because one wasn't there. But it looks as if the wood had walked right into the villages, tree after tree, step by step, until it was all over the village. Now you have quite big trees growing through roofs and out of

windows, and lots of smaller ones, too, everywhere, like children playing about.'

'You've got an imagination,' La Mère said.

'Don't tease him,' Rousset said earnestly. 'He knows what he's talking about. Trees—that's more alive to him almost than human beings, eh, Joannon?'

The woodsman looked up and smiled.

'Used to be, patron,' he said with a glance at the girl, 'at one time.'

'And Peira-Colonna?' La Mère asked. 'Have you been there?'

'No,' he answered. 'It's beyond Peyrouton, and that, of course, is on the other side. But I've heard people talk about it.'

'What is it? A place? I mean, a farm or a village?'

Joannon shrugged his shoulders. He had been fondling his pipe and, turning towards the fire, he now reached for a chip of kindling, set it alight from the log, and slowly and deliberately began the artful process of lighting.

'What makes you talk about Peira-Colonna?' Rousset wanted to know.

'Nothing particular,' La Mère answered. 'The name just occurred to me, speaking of the plateau. It's where the girl said she was going when she first arrived.' She rose from her seat by the fire. 'That reminds me. I meant to go and look in after the soup.'

Rousset nodded.

'Take them something,' he suggested.

'I was going to,' she answered. 'I have an extra fougasse.' She was busy packing something into one of the black canvas bags.

'A fougasse!' Rousset scoffed mockingly. 'That's not going to put a lot of strength into the fellow. No, take them the bottle.'

He rose and took it down from the shelf.

'There isn't much left,' he grumbled. 'Anyway, for a greeting. But bring it back.' He turned to the woodsman who was sitting quietly, smoking and watching the girl by his side at her needlework. 'You'll bring me a new bottle when you go down. When is he coming, your man Perlus from Villehaute?'

'I meant to go in about a couple of weeks,' Joannon answered.

Now that La Mère had gone, with the fougasse and the bottle in the canvas bag, Rousset went over and sat down in her seat.

'About Peira-Colonna,' he asked. 'What is it they're saying?'

'Nothing very much, patron,' Joannon answered. 'It's an old place, I think; used to be a castle or stronghold or something, but it's said to be mostly in ruins now. I don't know. I've never been there.'

'Who owns it?'

'I used to know the name. But now I forget. They're breeding cattle, I think——'

There was a pause while the woodsman thought. Rousset crossed and uncrossed his legs, waiting for him to remember.

'It wouldn't be Le Noir?' he asked. 'Or some such name?'

Joannon nodded. 'Yes, I think, Le Noir; that's what it was.'

Rousset looked in front of him towards the wall and Joannon's shadow, which the fire cast on the whitewash in a sharply cut silhouette. He said nothing. After a while he rose and went to the shelf but, remembering suddenly that the bottle wasn't there, turned back and sat down again with a worried and disappointed look on his bearded face.

'I wonder what Janine——' he muttered to himself and then stopped.

The woodsman didn't hear. He had put down his pipe and was helping Renée unravel a strand of tangled green knitting wool.

'Fabri,' said the girl, 'he's going to worry himself a bit now. He likes her, rather.'

'Your business, my girl,' Rousset said gently from his corner.

'This morning,' said Godefroy, 'when I was alone, a horse looked in by the window.'

'That was Fabri,' answered Janine.

'Is that its name?'

'No. The man's. The horse is called Ulysse.'

'But the man,' said Godefroy, 'I didn't see.'

That was true. For where he sat, on the stone step of the church porch, leaning back into the corner, Fabri was out of sight of Janine's window, while he himself, across the square, had the little house in his full view. There he sat, his knees drawn up, and watched Ulysse walk up to the window.

On three mornings since the stranger's arrival, coming up the

Bourgade with the horses from the river, he had found the window closed against the wind and cold. This fourth morning at last, under a thick and cloudy sky, he saw it open. He halted and wondered. Then he dismounted and sent Ulysse.

'The horse,' said Godefroy that afternoon, 'that horse surprised me. The way it looked in, and then at me, and finally nodded, I thought it would talk to me.'

'It talks to Fabri.'

'It had something to say. Perhaps it said it. I was the stupid one not to understand.'

Fabri, in his corner under the porch, watched Ulysse put his great head into the window. For a moment nothing happened. Then the head appeared again, and Ulysse, with a questing look, glanced back to the church. Fabri nodded. Right, he said; you are doing it right; just look once more. And the horse looked.

A man appeared at the window, his right arm in a sling. He looked the horse in the face with a calm, steady look. Fabri smiled to himself. The horse lifted its nose and sniffed close to the man's face, and the man raised his free arm and gently, steadily, stroked its nose with the palm of his hand. After a while the horse nodded and departed. Fabri rose and emerged from his hiding place. He rubbed his neck with the back of his hand, then pulled out his mouth organ and began to play loudly and vigorously as he walked off, the horse following him. He was not worried.

The mouth-organ player had six horses, and their large souls owned the whole of his modest and undemanding heart. With three of them, Ulysse, Michelle, and Bastien, he had arrived at Roquefort. They were his own and all he possessed and wanted to possess in life. For years they had provided his livelihood on the farmsteads and properties down in the valleys. Fabri with the three horses was hired for a week, for a month, for a season, and departed again. When he arrived at a new place in search of work he would halt outside the gate and send Ulysse to inquire. It was seldom very long before the farmer arrived and fetched him in. Sometimes Ulysse was reluctant or even refused to go beyond the gate. Then Fabri would not insist, and the four of them would go on. Nothing good is to be found for a man in a place which a horse is shy to enter. Thus he had come to Roquefort, and the

three horses in great happiness had stormed up the steep Bourgade. Three others had joined them, Raphaële, César, and Annette. They belonged to some of the citizens, but Fabri took care of all six of them, worked them and nursed them, and they filled his life. He was the Keeper of the Horses, and the children adored him and flocked around, laughing and dancing when he came up the Bourgade astride the mighty and wise Ulysse, the five others on either side, close to each other, entering the square to the sound of his mouth organ.

At the stable he found Joannon.

'I want to ask you,' said the woodsman, 'if we went, the two of us, just to look in.'

'Yes,' answered the Keeper of the Horses blushing.

'Because, it seems to me, perhaps he thinks one doesn't want him. After all, the men belong together.'

'Yes,' answered the Keeper of the Horses, rubbing his neck.

He looked at the woodsman and smiled.

'You'd do me a service,' he said, 'in a way.'

In the tiny house next to the stable and behind the citadel where Fabri had installed himself, little was to be found to remind one of the presence of man, such as table, chair, bed, and box, and nothing at all of woman. But there was much that spoke and smelled of horse: harness and bridle gear with bells, blanket and saddle-cloth, grooming brush, curry-comb and surcingle. Looking round and over its poor shabbiness, Fabri felt deeply content. The odour of life and of love was around him, strong, familiar, and graspable. There was not room for anything or anyone else, and it was not for him and his humble heart to ask for more. There, he mused, wandering round, picking up things from the floor—a leather strap, a rusty nail—and putting them back in their places, did you perhaps make yourself an idea? No, you did not. You would not even know how to sleep on anything but a palliasse and rolled in a horse blanket on the floor.

In the evening they knocked, and when Janine opened with a little cry of happy surprise, they saw the soldier sitting by the fire, the small boy by his side, both busily carving and whittling, and for a moment they were shy to enter.

'Salute, the company,' Joannon then said boldly.

'We've come to call,' said Fabri and grinned.

Godefroy, with his free hand, shook their hands. They were big men in their heavy leather jackets, their bright-coloured scarves wound round their necks, and they filled the kitchen and obscured the fire.

'Me,' said Fabri, 'I'm Fabri. You know my horse.'

'I do. And your horse knows me.'

'I'm Joannon,' said the woodsman. 'I'm by myself. We've come, actually——' He hesitated and smiled. 'With Janine's permission. If you'll join in a game.'

'Does he play belotte?' asked Fabri.

Godefroy nodded. 'But I've only one hand. For the moment.'

'For belotte it's enough. What do you call yourself?'

'We keep forgetting,' Joannon explained.

'Godefroy.'

'That's rare, as a name,' said Fabri reflectingly. He glanced at Janine. 'I might as well try to remember it, the name of your man.' He laughed softly. 'You're content?' She nodded.

'Let's go, then,' said Joannon. 'Jaubert and Modeste, they're waiting and will be annoyed if we stay too long. They might get drunk even.'

'And Archambault?' asked Janine. 'Aren't you playing with Archambault any more?'

Fabri shook his head. 'He's too difficult. Too excitable. And the moment one of the Italians comes in for a drink he gets red in the face, smashes up the game, and storms out. That's no way to play.'

'We like him all right,' said Joannon. 'But not at belotte. Not much. Now let's go. Good night, Janine.'

'Good night.'

Fabri was last to step out. 'Thanks for coming,' Janine said to him and then closed the door.

From her window she could see the dim little light that burned above the entrance of the *Sieur de Roquefort*. She opened the window for a moment and leaned out. From time to time, when the painted sign that swayed gently in the breeze was caught in the circle of the light, the moustached face, plumed hat, and brightly coloured jerkin of the ancient Master of the City shone up in its full splendour.

The shadows of the three men crossed the square, heading for the inn. The two friends had Godefroy in their midst, and their arms were linked in his. Fabri was singing, and fragments of his voice came

floating back towards the window. When they opened the door a broad sheet of light fell out on to the pavement, followed by a burst of loud welcoming greetings. Good and cheerful company was assembled inside and their arrival obviously eagerly awaited. Eventually the door was closed. Laughter and shouting ceased. From behind the window came the soft, frequently interrupted sound of Fabri's mouth organ, but after a while it, too, ceased. Instead voices became audible, shouting in regular, rhythmic intervals.

'Onze. Douze. Treize. Quatorze.'

And each time a fist came down on the table top.

The game had begun. Janine closed the window.

7

WINTER AT ROQUEFORT does not last long.

But to the people of the old city it was a tardy season. Up in Vargelonnes snow had appeared, white patches at first which had soon grown and merged into one large spreading blanket. Slowly it had moved downwards through the forest, and each morning the citizens had watched how much farther it had come and whether it would reach the valley. But, as Joannon had said, the advance of the snow called a halt half-way down the gorge and went no farther. And thereafter there was no more change for several weeks. Things took on an air of finality.

The sky above the citizens was shut away by a solid ceiling of thick, even cloud that had the colour of marble and seemed as immovable. The air did not stir; it was of sunless grey, transparent and yet dense and without lucidity. Walking up the Bourgade or across the square was like moving through tissues of clinging, sticky grey-ness. They would tear at your merest touch, but their fragments would continue to cling to your body and face like a spider's web, and you felt like having to drag along with you the lazy somnolence of a season that resented man's moving about in its heavy stillness and tried hard to slow down his urge for activity.

Up in Vargelonnes the big forests lay in shimmering, sparkling cold that cackled and sang under the light of a chilling sun. Down below, though far away in the valleys and towards the sea, the air seemed blue and the land, bathed in mellow sunshine, waiting but willing to wake. Roquefort, at the edge of the mountains, stood between the countries and the seasons. Here the sun appeared but little, for two or three hours a day around noon, and on many days not at all. As week followed week, the people of the city gradually grew restless and impatient. They waited for the great wind to break the spell.

Not all of them, though. The women were content in their houses, busy on the winter's work, and one like Archambault, who rumbled away day in and day out in his smithy, did not mind. The Italians did not mind and devoted the long days of inactivity to their inexhaustible family quarrels, thus leaving the nights, for once, quiet and without disturbance, devoted to sleep. But Fabri was bored because his horses were bored, and Godefroy grew impatient in his happiness. His shoulder had healed and his strength had returned, and he was anxious to lay his hands on something to do for Janine.

It was then that Joannon decided to start building his house.

He had been down to Terrerouge at the beginning of January, but after waiting in vain for four days he had come up again. Perlus, with his waggon from Villehaute, had not yet arrived with the supplies, and the innkeeper at Terrerouge, one Mocadeu, had had no word from him and had given it as his own opinion that Perlus would not come down before the mistral. Thus Joannon had decided, meanwhile, to set to work. For several days he had roamed the old city, wondering which house to choose and to fix up for his bride and himself. There were still many more houses than people at Roquefort. The inhabitants, although they had grown in numbers through the autumn and winter, were still no more than ten or twelve score, and of houses there was an ample choice.

'But,' insisted Joannon, 'I want a house from whose doorstep I can see my woods. A house from whose window my wife can see me depart and return. That kind of house.'

He found it, and as it was not much more than four walls and, for the rest, rubble, twisted iron, and broken beams, he resolved to rebuild

it after his own wish and design. He did not have to work single-handed. When he announced at Madame Rose's what he was about to undertake his plan was greeted with enthusiasm by the frequenters of the *Sieur de Roquefort*. Here, indeed, was an enterprise such as the citizens had been waiting for, and even the most indefatigable among the players of *belotte* welcomed the change to sudden activity. Help and advice were showered upon the woodsman from all sides, and it was soon clear that, with one and all of them rushing to take a hand, the building of Joannon's house had become the one great event of the winter at *Roquefort*.

The sons of Rousset Barthélemy worked with a frenzied enthusiasm, as if they were erecting a palace for a king, and as such, indeed, they imagined the homestead of their sister and future brother-in-law. Archambault, the grouser and grumbler, was at work day and night, forging and hammering and swearing away in his smithy at locks and bolts, grates and firedogs, with a mountainous ill humour that betrayed, to all who knew him, the height of his infuriated happiness.

Fabri was at last able to put his horses to use and brought up the steep Bourgade tree trunk after tree trunk which, in the open square and watched by an expert assembly of highly critical children, were sawn and cut and shaped by the nimble hands of Napoléon and Antonio Bonpère into the strong beams and rafters that were to hold ceiling and roof above the heads of Joannon and his beloved Renée. The Italians, indeed, proved highly valuable craftsmen, and even Archambault, eyeing them gruntingly at their work, would admit that they knew thoroughly their jobs of carpentry and joinery, although he would sooner have bitten off his tongue than told them so to their faces. Godefroy, the soldier, finally, to the pride of Janine and the surprise of every one else, turned out an experienced mason. He went to work thoughtfully and with deliberation and was not to be hustled or hurried by anyone.

'The soldier,' said Joannon, 'look at him. He's building me a fortress and not a little house against the rain.'

At his words, spoken in friendly mockery, Godefroy looked a little abashed.

'It's all I know about building,' he answered with an apologetic shrug. 'Fortresses. You're right. We never built anything else where I was.'

He looked at his friend in great earnest.

'But you don't want a little house against the rain,' he said. 'It wouldn't be worth building, would it?'

'What is worth building?' asked Joannon.

'Things that last.'

'But things don't last. Not even fortresses.'

'What, then, lasts?' asked the soldier, raising himself from his work and wiping his sweating brow.

'Oh,' answered the shantyman, puzzled, 'bigger things, I suppose. A mountain. A wood, perhaps.'

They stepped across the threshold of the newly built and almost completed house and now looked over the wide vista that opened up before them. It was the midday hour, and they were alone. The others had retired to their homes for their meals. Stillness lay about them.

'The great big wood up there,' said Joannon musingly, 'that wood was there, I should think, long before anybody even thought of putting stones upon each other up here on the rock. The stones have tumbled down, and we've got to put them up again, as people before us had to do, but the wood is still there. It will still be there long after the stones have been put up again for the last time. Or perhaps——'

He paused and thought.

'Or perhaps not. I have seen even woods die. Of age and sickness and disgust, or being devoured by a sea of flames, suddenly, no one knowing why and how. That, too, I've seen happen.'

'So?' asked the soldier.

'So nothing,' smiled the shantyman. 'Never mind what I say. Don't start me talking or you'll hear a lot of nonsense.'

'The way I look at it,' said the soldier, 'it's the memory that matters, the memory of the things you make. You make them so that their memory lasts. That's where a house is better than a wood. Or isn't it?' He looked at his friend with a doubtful face. 'Out there where I was we would build a stronghold and we would make it as powerful as we could, against Nature, God, and eternity, we would say. We didn't mean that, of course, but we said it. We knew that it would not last even against man, and it didn't, but that wasn't what mattered. It broke asunder into a thousand pieces the next day, under the fire of guns and bombs, and we knew it would when we built it. Yet we

built it. Because we built it for the memory, and that lasts. It is still there; it will always be there; nothing can wipe it off the face of the earth. It will still be there long after the river on whose bank it stands has dried up and the woods that surround it have died of sickness and disgust, as you say.' He looked again at his friend, and the expression of questing doubt was still on his face. 'In the memory of man a wood of a thousand trees is nothing,' he added. 'But three stones piled upon one another by the bleeding hands of man outlast a hundred generations. I keep thinking of it.'

'You shouldn't,' the woodsman said.

'Why?'

'Because you weren't happy—where you were. Or were you?'

Godefroy did not answer. He turned back into the house.

'I'll show you something,' he said.

He picked up a heavy round object from the dark corner of the room and stepped with it back into the light. He weighed it in his hand. It was the size of a small child's head, of grey stone, smooth and round. Joannon took it and weighed it in his own palm.

'That's a curious kind of boulder,' he said. 'Where did you find it?'

'It's no boulder. It's a stone cannon ball. I found it stuck in the back wall, over there. To get there it must have penetrated the outer wall, over there, approximately two feet from the corner to the left. That means'—he stepped on to the threshold and pointed towards the wood—'somebody fired it from a field gun that was placed roughly over there, on the fringe of the wood, some twenty feet above the river bed. It's simple, isn't it?'

'Very,' answered the woodsman. 'You mean to say some fellow fired this thing with a gun right through my kitchen?'

'He did.' The soldier nodded pensively. 'You say I'm building you a fortress. You're right; only it isn't me who's building it. I'm merely putting the stones back where they belong. The memory—here it is.'

'Yes,' answered the woodsman. 'Here it is. I must show this thing to the patron. It'll puzzle him.'

The patron, at this time, was puzzled by a good many things. The dead season, as he called it, had made him restive. He was unhappy because sitting on his doorstep, quietly musing and watching the

square, was not often pleasant at this time of year. More often now than before he remembered the Centurion and longed for his company. He thought of his black belly-shaped bottle which had given him such a strange and uproarious welcome when he first arrived, and he wished he could have a long draught from it to bring back his large dreams and great, exhilarating fancies. But nothing had been seen of the little man for a long time, and Rousset, now only vaguely certain of his real bodily existence, was anxious to have it reconfirmed. He had never spoken to Fortescue about the Leader of the Hundred Men since his last appearance, but somehow he felt that the gaunt man in the Goulette knew more about him than he, Rousset, knew himself.

He wanted to talk to Fortescue about the Centurion and his stories and on several evenings appeared unexpectedly at the Goulette, where he found his friend immersed in his books and scripts of which he seemed to have an ever-growing quantity. But somehow he never managed to bring the conversation round to the little old man with the false money, to the tales of the great Battle of Peira-Colonna, and the adventures and ultimate fate of the great Jehan le Noir and his clan, these stories that had kept his mind busy, on and off, in a vague, fanciful manner ever since he first heard them. But Fortescue, too, was full of stories, and Rousset, sitting by his friend's fireside, smoking his caporal, liked to listen to them, although he was never quite clear exactly where and how they fitted into the pattern of the world as he knew and imagined it. That they belonged to it there was, however, no doubt.

Fortescue's stories came from the books and scripts which he studied so assiduously, and that, in Rousset's eyes, established their truth and unchallengeable reality. The names of famous men and women occurred in them, and Fortescue told of their lives and adventures in a manner that proved that he had met and known them all. Rousset was quite sure that he had. Laurette de Sade and Phanette de Gantelmi, Guilhem de Cabestan and Rambaud d'Agout were at home in the Goulette, and indeed they lived in it along with many others whose faces and miens Rousset saw clearly before him as he sat in front of Fortescue's fire, staring into the glow and listening to his friend's softly rumbling voice and the rustling of the pages as he turned them. He felt surer than ever that Fortescue knew all about

the Centurion; in fact, that he knew the Master of the City very well. There was a close link between Fortescue's ancient friends and Rousset's own experience with the man with the belly-shaped bottle. And in the end Rousset, a great believer in the inexplicable, was quite content to leave it at that.

One evening, however, Fortescue said: 'I have lost one of them, and I don't know what has become of him.'

'Who is he?' asked Rousset. 'Do I know him?'

'You may. He calls himself Bertrand de Tressaille.'

Rousset, staring into the fire, thought hard but could not remember the name.

'When I saw him last,' continued Fortescue, 'he was at the Court of Raymond des Baux with whom he had a quarrel over his sister Baussette. He was a gifted and ambitious man and he left Les Baux, vowing to build a mightier and more beautiful city of his own. But did he ever do it and where? That I should like to know. But——'

He opened the book that lay on his knees and pointed at a page which was half torn out.

'—but there I lose his trace. He passes with his men through Montmajour, then through Paradou and Maussane, onwards through Mouriès and Miramas into the Vacquièrè mountains. Thereafter——'

'Wait,' interrupted Rousset. 'Vacquièrè, that is not far from here, and there is only one road across that country.'

'I know. That road issues at Terrerouge. But did Bertrand de Tressaille ever get as far as that? Where is he, and where is his city?'

'That,' answered Rousset Barthélemy, 'the Centurion might know. We must ask him when he returns.'

That night he walked home deep in thought. For months there had been no sign of the little old man, just as there had been none of the great wind that would at last break the spell of dull enchantment. But to-night as he walked up the steps from the Goulette towards the square there was a difference in the air. At first Rousset thought that it was merely the cold that made his head dizzy after the long hour spent near the fire. But then he realized it was not that. There was a sudden freshness in the air, abrupt sharp whiffs and gushes, and they grew stronger the higher up he came towards the square. He

put his nose to the wind. Yes, the air was moving. It pushed, still rather irresolutely, a little this way, a little that way, but it moved. Now as he was rounding the corner of Janine's house he heard voices. They came from the square. The hour was late, and the excited noise astonished him. Reaching the square, he saw a group of men standing round the fountain, talking and gesticulating excitedly and staring and pointing towards the sky. Into their talk now suddenly fell the bang of a slamming window, then another, and silence again. Into the stillness drove a new gush of air. Rousset gazed at the sky. The heavens were in labour. The thick blanket of cloud was torn asunder. The great marble ceiling was breaking up before his eyes into huge blocks and oddly shaped pieces. They pushed against each other, crashed and splintered, and broke into smaller fragments, and all of them were streaming away ceaselessly, at ever-growing speed, in one direction, away from the mountains and the city towards the lowlands and the distant sea. Now the sky resembled a river when the ice begins to break and drift. Floe upon floe came pushing along, piling on top of each other, separating again, drifting along, and now as they drifted they began to leave small open spaces here and there, and the spaces grew and the sky began to clear. With meteoric suddenness the moon burst forth out of nowhere, shedding a dazzling white light across the wind-swept heavenly sea and the nightly square of the city where the burghers were assembled in excited wonderment, craning their necks, watching the furious, uproarious spectacle.

The wind, the great wind, roared and bellowed.

'There it is at last,' said Rousset Barthélemy.

He had joined the men at the fountain and in the moonlight recognized their faces.

'Hoy, Barthélemy!' cried Archambault. 'The great mistral!'

The great mistral swept the square with merciless furore; it whipped up the moonlight like a milky liquid, flinging it in sudden showers and sprays into the men's faces. It drove tears of cold and excitement into their eyes, it blew their clothes, their coats and scarves about and made their hair flutter like horses' manes.

'Three days!' cried old Jaubert prophetically. 'Six days! No bets?'

'Nine days!' shouted Modeste into the pandemonium of clattering doors and rattling windows.

'It'll set the bell a-chiming!' laughed Gaspard.

'Twelve days!' shouted Fabri. 'Who bets?'

'Fifteen days!' cried Valette.

'Eighteen days!' barked old Gidéon. 'Who bets?'

Rousset Barthélemy escaped into the inn. Tears were streaming down his face, and he could hardly see. Madame Rose, severely moustached and imperturbable as ever, stood behind the zinc.

'Sapristi,' panted Rousset, 'this time it has caught on. Give me a crème de menthe. I'm frozen to the bones. *Diable*, what a wind!'

He gulped down the drink, shook himself like a wet dog, wiped his face, and departed. Outside in the square the shouting and betting went on.

In his kitchen he found the family and Joannon.

'Ho, patron!' said the woodsman. 'What do you say? The house is ready!'

'Bless you!' panted Rousset. 'But stop calling me patron. I'm no more the patron of this place than the big rat in Fabri's stable. So you've finished your house.'

'What remains to be done is woman's work.'

Joannon laughed, queer with happiness. The great green starlight shone brightly in his eyes.

'And now with the wind,' he said, 'to-morrow morning first thing I'm on my way to Terrerouge. And the soldier is coming with me.'

'Good,' answered Rousset. 'Take the ass.'

At first light Godefroy was ready to leave.

The wind blew as furiously as ever, and it had been hard to get a fire started. The storm roared down the chimney and blew last night's ashes all over the kitchen. But at last Janine had succeeded. The coffee had been made and drunk.

'You look almost as if you didn't want to go,' she said.

'Oh, I want to go.' He smiled. 'But it's odd—to go.'

'You're coming back. There. Silly.'

He rose and went for his leather jacket. As he put it on he looked round the room.

'It's the coming back,' he said, wonderingly. 'It's the first time that I'm going anywhere and know that I'm coming back.' He looked

at her anxiously and gratefully. 'We've been living like husband and wife.'

She nodded happily.

'You'll be cold like that. Take the scarf.'

She was wearing it round her neck and now took it off.

'It's yours,' he said.

'I'll have time, long evenings while you're away, to make myself a new one. Take it.'

As she put it round his neck and tied it under his throat and stuffed the ends into his jacket he took her cheeks between his hands and drew her up to him and kissed her.

'Don't lose it,' she breathed under his kiss. 'Don't let it get stolen.'

'I love you,' he said, and held her tight. 'I love you very dearly.'

There was a knock at the window-pane and a voice through the storm. 'Ho, soldier! Ready?'

Yes, he was ready. He took a last look round the kitchen to make sure he wasn't leaving behind anything he ought to take and wasn't taking anything he ought to leave. It was difficult because he possessed so little, but he did not want the room, after he had left, to look as if he had never lived in it. His old shirt was hanging from a nail by the fireplace; Janine had mended and washed it, and he was wearing the new one she had made for him. Shirt, he thought, you're going to see to the house in my stead. That way things will keep together as we mean them to keep together, and the weeks and months of our life will not fall apart. But he also took his pipe from his coat pocket and slipped it on to the dark corner of the table. I shall not be able to smoke on my way, he thought, but after I'm gone she will find it, thinking that I forgot it, and together they will wait for me to come back. He smiled at her. She had not noticed. They went to the door.

Outside was Joannon, holding in each hand a donkey by its halter, and a shotgun slung over each shoulder.

'I've borrowed old Gidéon's ass for you,' he said; 'that way we shall be better off, each with an ass. The patron's also given me his gun for you. I'll carry my own.'

'You think of everything.'

'Oh, the guns we're just taking like that, for the sake of taking them. Janine, you aren't cross with me for carrying off your man?'

'You'll bring him back. How long do you reckon to be away?'

'It depends on Perlus. Can you do without him for a week?'

He took down Rousset's shotgun and handed it to Godefroy, who had a brief look at its lock and trigger and then slung it over his shoulder. Then he took the halter of Gidéon's donkey from Joannon.

'When you get to La Madone,' said Janine to Joannon. She bent down and held her skirt round her knees because the wind tried to get underneath and blow it up like a balloon. 'At La Madone,' she went on, laughing, 'go and see old Baptiste. They'll tell you where he lives. He was kind to me once, and I want him to know that I haven't forgotten.'

Joannon nodded. He touched the brim of his cocky little brown hat, but it wasn't clear whether it was for a greeting or to prevent it from being blown off his head.

'*Bon voyage*,' said Janine, and waved her hand.

They turned their donkeys and started down the Bourgade. When the soldier looked back once more she was still in the door, waving, the wind dancing about her, and his heart was heavy with happiness.

'I mustn't forget to bring something for the boy,' he said.

'We'll think of something,' answered the woodsman.

They passed Archambault's house half-way down the Bourgade and found the blacksmith on his doorstep waiting for them.

'You'll do me a service, Joannon,' he said. 'If it isn't too much trouble remembering. At Terrerouge, go and see the big Père Nicholas. He's the baker there and, well, a friend of mine of old.'

'I know him. What's the message?'

'Nothing,' shrugged the blacksmith. 'Just ask him how he's doing. And tell him I'm doing all right. He'll like to know.'

'Will be done,' answered Joannon. 'What with all the commissions and messages, we should have written it all in a book, eh, soldier?'

Thus they crossed the bridge, Godefroy for the first time since his arrival.

THEY PASSED DOWN the dry river bed, Joannon in front and the soldier following, each man holding his ass by its halter and guiding it cautiously as the rough path went down steeply among the stones and boulders and thorny gorse.

The great wind blew ceaselessly.

Above them it swept over the roof tops of the old city, and behind their backs the crowns of the big pine trees bent and bowed towards the opening land. Godefroy gazed up the steep smooth rock. With every step he took the rock grew higher and steeper, the old city that crowned it smaller, more remote and more inaccessible. When they reached the foot of the rock and Godefroy glanced up the bow of the gigantic ship, it seemed suddenly an absurd and weirdly unreal thought that high up there this fortress in the skies was the place from which he came, the place where he belonged and to which he was going to return.

'Come on,' said the woodsman. 'You're not seeing it for the last time.'

'No,' answered the soldier. 'For the first.'

They followed the river a little while to the east until they hit upon the path that came meandering down among the dead vineyards from the crest of the hill range. For an hour or so it was steep climbing, and the river and the rock and the mountains of Vargelannes fell away behind them, and they did not turn to look back. It was curious, Godefroy reflected, how the land had suddenly grown narrow beneath his feet. Its immensity was still in his mind as he was used to behold it, gazing down from the ramparts of the fortress. Up there its vastness had been clear and plain to him as the palm of his hand. The roads and paths, down valleys, up through forests, and across the hills, had been visibly and unmistakably drawn. Terrerouge, the place they were bound for, it is true, was even from high up not much more than a speck on the horizon, but it was there; he had seen it and known precisely what route to take in order to reach it. But now, with his feet on the road, he did not know where to turn. The land had shrunk to the size of a valley, a range of hills beyond which you

could not see, and in its enclosed narrowness it had become confused and perplexing. It is truly only now, he thought, that I have come back to earth and don't know my way.

But Joannon was leading. When they reached the ridge of the hill he sat down at the fringe of a small, scraggy alder wood and looked back. Roquefort was already far away and looked small against the towering masses of Vargelottes which filled the horizon behind it. But now, to the right and left of the rock, and particularly on the sloping stretch between the fringe of the great wood and the river-bank, the return of man and his presence had become visible. Among the wilderness of deserted, desolate land the squares of cultivated soil stood out, each framed in its low walls of grey boulders which at the time of the great rains prevent the fields from being washed down the slope and into the river. Rousset's great field of winter oats, Fabri's field, Modeste's terraced vineyards, Jaubert's gently sloping pasture, Gidéon's field, Valette's square of evenly drawn furrows, and farther below the fallow ground the men had broken up before the onset of winter, and then the plain, tufted with tussocks and mops of grass, wandering away towards the river and beyond it. And across it all, with unabated insistence, raced the wind.

The sky was still not clear.

All night the great wind had been at work, labouring tenaciously to break up the marble ceiling of cloud, to split up the big blocks, to break and grind to fragments and shreds the floating pieces. Once they had been broken the great rout set in, and the two men, sitting at the fringe of the alder wood, facing the mountains, watched the tattered, feathery remnants, like a beaten army, being driven out mercilessly above their heads. But it was endless labour to sweep the celestial plains. Hardly had the last fluffs of cloud, thin pale stragglers now who had lost touch and were erring about forlornly, been hunted down one by one and blown and torn to pieces, when new gigantic armies loomed up on the horizon and threateningly began to move forward. Fresh banks of marble-grey thickness pushed up their way from behind the summits of Vargelottes, and the infuriated storm, after a brief spell of quiet and stillness, set to work again. The two men rose and went on their way again.

'It's a nine days' wind,' said Joannon, 'you'll see; by the time we get back it will be all over.'

The sky was very high. And during the short spells when it was clear, brushed and swept and scoured from end to end, the vast expanse of the virgin heavens spanned the Land of the Hundred Hills with a blue silken dome of such endless height that it took man's breath away. At such moments the air suddenly smelled of the sun; birds began to sing all of a sudden in the elms and holly oaks; the wood pigeons, most fearful of all of the great sweeping wind, appeared gliding through the still air on motionless wings. Two paths ran down the hillside, one towards the east, one to the south-west, and the two men, following the second, soon saw down below in the next valley, among a cluster of grey and barren olive trees, the white remnants of the dead hamlet of Ollioure. When they reached it Roquefort was finally out of sight. Peace and stillness hung about the olive grove, and the sun played on the white bleached stone blocks of the crumbled houses. Young larches and a wild fig tree or two had sprung up between them here and there. There must be a small well somewhere near by, for the grass among the stones and trees was fresh and of a deep, sapful green. The asses at once began to graze.

The two men put down their guns and rested.

'I like this place,' said Joannon, his eyes half closed against the sun. 'It's curious. It's all death, age, decay, bleached bones of a crumbled, faded life. And yet it is sweet. It's all love and tenderness, the white stones, half a wall, a white chimney standing up covered with ivy, an arch fallen in in the middle—does it frighten you?'

'No,' answered Godefroy. 'It makes one weep——'

'With happiness. The things the earth does to comfort the lonely heart of man. The patron says his father's mother was born here. It's like saying——'

'—this is the house of Nausicaä. Her multi-coloured ball dances in the high grass among the olive trees and rolls away among the cuckoo flower. The voices of the girls ring through the trees, and the white chimney is like the pillar of a marble temple.'

'Who says it isn't?' asked the woodsman, opening his eyes. 'The stillness, it's never death. It's birth, always. You—you have no children anywhere in the world, have you?'

'No,' answered Godefroy. 'Nowhere in the world.'

'Rée is going to have children,' Joannon went on, blinking against the sun and balancing a leaf of grass between his teeth. 'And—Janine.'

The soldier felt the sun on his back, and its trembling warmth was like a cloak descending unexpectedly on his erect body and enclosing him in its weightless folds.

'Me,' he said, 'I'm not asking for everything.'

'The wind,' Joannon said. 'It's up again. Hey, the donkeys!'

They passed La Chadourne towards the midday hour, and now the wind smelled of stone and rain. They looked up and saw the sky was covered again. They sat down for a few minutes for a hunk of bread, a slice of *andouillette*, a piece of cheese, and a drink of wine from Joannon's bottle which he carried in his haversack.

'We're going to eat at La Madone,' he said.

Then they were up again and on their way. At St. Saturnin des Vignes, which they reached in the late afternoon, they made their last stop. The persistent wind had dried their throats and made them thirsty. The donkeys felt the same. In an archway by the inn they found a fountain, drank and washed their faces. Thereafter they crossed the forest called La Grésille which extends almost the whole way between St. Saturnin and La Madone, and when they at last emerged from it they were astonished to find the day just sinking. In there, in the Grésille, they had been walking as if in dark night. The forest was thick, but the great wind penetrated into its very heart. For hours the moaning and complaining of thousands of trees, the swishing and whipping of twigs and branches, the unceasing groaning and cracking had been drumming in their ears, and they felt almost deaf when at last they gained the valley. Here, too, the wind still reigned. But it took longer strides; it smelled of water and wet straw and seemed almost soundless. They were tired and felt cold as they walked into La Madone at the fall of dusk. Looking at each other, nodding and falling into even step, they felt that the long day had been like a good year spent together.

La Madone looked dead. It is a small village of some thirty houses tucked away in the hollow of a dale and built round a pond framed with poplars and cypresses. The sky was dark and of a muddy grey;

all the morning clearness had gone. But the wind continued to blow; the cypresses and poplars bent and swayed to and fro above the roofs, and in the brown uncertain light the geese and ducks, blown off the agitated pool, were huddling in the village washhouse. The two donkeys were tired and had become fussy and irritable. They refused to walk by each other's side and would not look at one another.

'Asses are the queerest things of all,' said Joannon. 'What's biting them now?'

'They must have quarrelled somewhere on the way.'

'I suppose,' suggested Joannon. 'It would be best to look for old Baptiste straight away.'

A small girl who carried a loaf of bread under her arm showed them the way. It was almost the last house of the village, and a lone light shone from the kitchen window. Joannon knocked, and after a long time the door was opened a hand's breadth, and a large, bald, and oddly misshapen head appeared.

'One named Janine sends us,' said Joannon, 'with greetings for Monsieur Baptiste.'

The door was instantly opened wide. In it stood a frail and old little man with a round head far too large and an enormous growth behind his right ear. It had a bulbous shape, the size of a fair round gourd, and its weight seemed to pull Monsieur Baptiste's head down on his right shoulder, which made him seem to look at you in a fearful and suspicious way. But his voice was gentle and unhurried, and there was a grainy quality to it, like dry running sand.

'You've come to spend the night?' he asked.

'We didn't mean to.'

'You'll stay.' He paused and looked. 'You'll eat.' He paused and looked again. 'You're at home.' He closed the door and led the way to his kitchen, holding the light.

Baptiste's kitchen was warm and spacious. A large fire was burning in the hearth, and the soup was boiling in the black pot that hung from the hook and chain above the fire. A grey-haired silent woman in carpet slippers and of no ascertainable age stirred the pot, rummaged about the room, disappeared, and after a while came again performing the same noiseless duties once more. Joannon had gone to look after the asses. They were so sleepy and ill-humoured that they

refused to move another step. Godefroy heard him talking to them outside by the shed.

'At one time,' said Baptiste, seated in a large armchair with a high curved back against which he rested his cumbersome head, 'at one time, you know, it was Janine who looked after me here in this kitchen, as Joséphine does now. I was better off then.' He shifted his head a little and looked toward Godefroy, who stood by the fire rubbing his hands. 'It is kind of her to remember me,' he added in his smooth-running voice. 'Where is she now?'

'At Roquefort. Where we come from. My comrade and I.'

He guessed that the old man did not know where exactly that was.

'I'm sorry she left me, sorry to this day. It was altogether very unfortunate. And very unjust. It must have hurt her, and I'm glad to know she doesn't hold it against me.'

What? Godefroy was about to ask. But Baptiste continued.

'So she is no longer at St. Cézaire,' he said. 'That is where she went from here. With her little boy. I miss her, now that we speak of her.' He sighed and shifted his head.

Joannon came back, and they sat down for the soup round the table under the lamp, the four of them. The woman Joséphine was sitting opposite Godefroy, and between mouthfuls he looked at her face. It was grey, empty, and meaningless, like an old, creased newspaper sheet. She had not once opened her mouth to speak, but Godefroy felt that if she did her voice would sound like crumpling paper, and he was glad she remained silent. But the others were silent, too, while they ate, and gradually as time drew out over the meal a dull suspense began to brood round the table.

Godefroy had long ceased looking at the woman. He was looking at Janine, who was now sitting opposite him. The thought of her in these surroundings troubled him, and he tried to imagine her sitting at the table with old Baptiste and his gourd growth that looked like two heads on one neck. He imagined that it was here and now, in this kitchen, on this evening, that he saw her first, entering, as he had, as an unannounced stranger. The fullness of her body and face, the smooth maturity of her movements, the pulsating ripeness of her smile were at once present in his mind, and he felt painfully how they hurt themselves against the ugliness of the room, its alien smell, its

sickly nagging light. How unhappy she must have been in this room, how broken and desperate that she ever entered it and the services of old Baptiste.

At last the woman Joséphine rose, cleared the table, and disappeared. And at once Baptiste began to speak.

'Tell me,' he asked. 'It is not with a purpose that you have come?'

'No,' answered Joannon, unperturbed. 'Why should it be?'

'Because——' He paused for a moment and then turned his arm-chair back to the fire. The two men rose from their chairs and stepped across to the hearth. Joannon sat down on a low stool, but Godefroy remained standing, his hands in his pockets, his shoulder leaning against the mantelpiece.

'Because recently,' said Baptiste, 'some one called here to inquire after Janine. A stranger whom I had never seen before, and from the odd way he spoke, it seemed to me that he did not come from this region. He looked like a cowherd or ox driver. When I looked out later I saw that he had a companion who was waiting for him outside. At the time I gave the matter little attention, but now that you're bringing her name in again, it puzzles me.'

He shifted his head into a more comfortable position and looked at the two men from his right shoulder, first at Godefroy standing, then at Joannon sitting in front of him, and then bent slightly forward. His voice now was running even more softly than before.

'The two men who inquired after her,' he said, and Godefroy noticed that he had begun to twiddle his thumbs, with his hands folded on his knees, 'these two men, I heard later on, had tried to find Janine at St. Cézaire, and when she wasn't there they had come back here. Now that you tell me where she is, this explains itself.' He paused and looked at Godefroy, whose sombre face was in the shade above the flickering light. 'I didn't like these two men, and the more I think about them now, the less I like them. They were not from these parts, and why should they have wanted to follow her about like this?'

'How would one recognize them,' Joannon asked, 'if one were to meet them?'

'Easy,' replied the old man. 'Easy enough. They're small, slim fellows, and they wear a badge on their leather jerkins. I saw it on

the one who came to my door. It's a large letter N, embroidered. What can it mean?

Joannon gave a shrug but said nothing. He pulled out his pipe and began to fill it. Then he reached for a chip of kindling from the fire.

'How long ago?' he asked.

'Five, six days, perhaps a week.' At last Baptiste stopped twiddling his thumbs.

'Maybe you've done her a service,' Joannon said, 'by telling us.'

'It would make me happy,' the old man answered modestly. 'I was attached to her because she was so full of unhappiness. Each day I took a little of her unhappiness away from her. I watched her burden grow lighter from day to day, and it made me feel happy. I nursed her like a sick bird and I hoped she would not fly away again, although I knew she would, sooner or later. But I didn't expect it to happen that way. In the end I had to hand all her unhappiness back to her, and thus she went, in greater misfortune than she came——'

'How?' Godefroy interrupted.

His husky voice, coming from the dark, made the old man look up.

'I thought you knew.'

'Tell him all the same,' said Joannon.

He rose and, leaving a trail of blue tobacco smoke behind him that hung in the light like a thin long cloud from the fireplace to the door, went out of the room. After a while, in the silence that followed, Godefroy heard him outside, making water against the shed and then going in to the donkeys.

'She was perfectly innocent of it all,' said Baptiste, 'and so was the boy. Sit down so that I can see your face in the light. She was innocent, but her innocence was proved only after the damage had been done and she had left. Then it looked like a deliberate attempt to drive her out of my house and out of the village. The way it all came to light afterwards leaves little doubt about that. But why did she leave St. Cézaire?'

Godefroy gave a shrug, leaving it open whether he did not know or did not care to tell. The old man looked at him sadly and at the same time comforted.

'I'm glad she knows it wasn't my doing,' he repeated. This, after all his many words, seemed to be all he was really worrying about.

He rose and now stood before Godefroy, his large misshapen head dangling uncannily above the soldier's face.

'You're her lover,' he said. He paused and seemed to wait for the effect of his words. Godefroy said nothing. 'I knew you were her lover from the moment you came in. I looked at the two of you and I knew it was you whom she had sent, not the other one. The other one did the talking. You—you did the looking. You looked well.'

That night, in the strange house and in an unfamiliar room, the two men felt ill at ease. The wind had fallen off later in the evening, but they had become so used to its constant sound that the sudden quiet and stillness made them restless. They both slept badly, and when soon after midnight the wind rose again the two men woke almost at the same moment, and with a sigh of relief. Joannon rose and went to the window. Hosts of black, grey, and white clouds fell over each other as the storm drove them across the sky. They fled in all directions, gathered and piled up in a massive bank that seemed to offer some resistance, and were the next moment again blasted to fragments and dispersed. A full moon stood just above the hills, but its light did not spread; it was blown hither and thither, and in its erratic flicker the country around took on an air of exasperated sleeplessness. The tall poplars and cypresses by the pond bent and curved their backs under the relentless punishment of the storm, and at one time Joannon, who knew the voices of the trees, heard the agonized moan of an old poplar and, a second later, the splintering crash as its back broke and its face hit the ground. He turned back into the room.

'Are you awake, soldier?' he asked.

'Yes,' answered Godefroy from his bed. 'Talk.'

'I've been speaking to the woman before I came up.'

'What did she say?'

'You're sure you don't mind? I shouldn't meddle in your affairs.'

'You're meddling in nothing. We're pals, aren't we?'

'We are. She says they made her and the boy look like thieves. All sorts of traps and tricks. It began shortly after she came to this house. Things were missing here and there, money, food, little valuables. At first only with the neighbours, then finally also here. Each day either

she or the boy were accused of something new. They could never prove that she had done it, but she couldn't that she had not, either. You understand?

'But who would want to do such a thing?'

'In the end they forced Baptiste to dismiss her and threatened her not to return to the village. Soon after she'd gone most of the things they had said she'd stolen turned up again in one way or another. The woman says the thing's been hanging over the village like a bad smell ever since.'

'It still stinks under this roof,' Godefroy said. 'Let's get up and be off.'

'I thought I should tell you. Because we're pals.'

Joannon walked over to the beds and sat down.

'You're not worrying yourself, soldier, are you?'

Godefroy was lying on his back, his hands folded behind his head, his knees drawn up.

'No,' he answered. He stared at the ceiling, which now and then, as the clouds hurried past the moon, was streaked with fleeting flashes of light. 'I'm puzzled.'

'Explain,' said Joannon.

'It's this way. Whenever we go together, you and I, we seem to be going backwards and forwards at the same time. For instance, we build a house and I find a buried old cannon ball. We go on a journey and I find a buried old story. With you going by my side all the time something past, or forgotten, or unknown springs up and gets between my feet. Or between my thoughts. But that's the same thing. One doesn't walk with one's feet alone. That sort of thing has never happened to me before, and it puzzles me. We're a rare combination, the two of us. Let's go back to sleep and be out of here first thing in the morning.'

'You're explaining yourself well,' answered Joannon. With a remorseful sigh he stretched himself out again. 'But I wish you wouldn't worry yourself.'

There was no answer from his companion's bed, and he closed his eyes. For a long time he listened to the wind and the groaning lamentations of the trees.

At first light they were up and departed.

The morning began grey, stormy, and wet. Moisture hung thick in the air; there was a humid sheen on their clothes, and their faces and hands felt damp. Behind La Madone, after less than an hour between neglected pastures and untilled fields, their road dwindled to a mere field path and soon afterwards lost itself in a waterlogged meadow whence it did not emerge again. But beyond the ground began to swell and then to rise, and once they had reached the high ground on the other side they entered a total wilderness. The great land of heather, gorse, and broom began.

'It's called Le Pachoun,' said Joannon. 'What it means I've often wondered. It's an odd name.'

'How far does it stretch?'

'From now on all the way.'

It was an endless, rolling country, hill after hill, dale after dale, and it seemed to walk with the two men as they set forth across its rambling scraggedness. Up here the wind blew furiously, but the air was dry, and it was easy, almost effortless, walking. Le Pachoun is a great-hearted country, and many a man, crossing it in solitude with his dog or ass between sunrise and sunset, has dreamed a whole life for himself as he walked. Towards midday the greyness of the sky began to wear thin. A faint, timid blue shone through, and the rest of the day they walked in shy and tender sunshine, following their thoughts which sailed ahead of them on the dry, sunlit air. In the early afternoon they heard the bark of a dog from afar and soon afterwards saw the first flock of sheep among the gorse of a slope near by. From now on the sheep accompanied them. The tinkling of their bells came from all sides and moved with them, in waves of straying sound, until they reached the village.

Terreroige is in the heart of the sheep's country, and the earth around it indeed is red as rust. Two roads, one issuing from the mountains of Vacquièrre, the other coming down from Villehaute, meet at the low Roman bridge which, with a single graceful span, stands astride a swiftly running stream. The houses of Terreroige stand around the bridge, and the inn overlooks the water and the water mill on the other bank. Terreroige may not always have been a village of twenty or thirty houses. At one time it seems to have stretched farther down the stream and up the hill slopes on either

side of the stream. At that time it may have been a small and prosperous town, flourishing on the trade of two great roads and one river. The ruins of abandoned houses, of a watch-tower, and a small, compact citadel speak of that time. But to-day the place has shrunk. Sheep live in all the abandoned houses and in most of the inhabited ones, and the people of Terrerouge live on the sheep.

Mocadeu, the innkeeper, stood in the door of his house as the two men crossed the bridge with their donkeys. He was a long and lanky man with a hairy, rectangular, and loose-jawed face, and he pulled it very long when he saw Joannon.

'Salute,' he said with a rumbling voice that seemed to come up all the way from his stomach. 'Your man Perlus is not yet in.'

Having given this disappointing news straight and unvarnished, without the loss of a moment, he proceeded to grin and finally, shaking the men's hands, to burst into a great laugh, as if he had greeted his friends with a most heartening joke of welcome.

But Joannon was not the least dismayed.

'Never mind,' he answered. 'He won't be long, Perlus. This time we'll wait. I've brought this comrade here.'

'Welcome,' rumbled Mocadeu. 'And what passes on the way?'

'Little. We'll talk to you.'

Godefroy walked behind Mocadeu, who led them down the long, vaulted cobbled passage at whose far end, through a half-open door, shone the bright fire of the hearth in the taproom. It smelled of sheep, fresh resinous wood, wet wool and leather, and the evening's soup, mutton, and onions. Godefroy felt tired and content. Mocadeu's light wandered scampering over the whitewashed wall, showing up the shadows of things suspended here and there, a pair of shears, a horse-whip, rake, and scythe, and near the door it fell, in passing, on some clothes hanging in a row from half a dozen nails. Godefroy stopped and then turned round to Joannon.

'Look,' he said, half aloud, and lifted the sleeve of a black leather jerkin which hung closest to the door.

Joannon nodded. 'You know how to look,' he murmured. 'And the other?'

'Here——' The other jerkin as well showed the large *N* embroidered in silver above the left breast pocket.

'We shall know in good time,' answered Joannon.
They entered the taproom and sat down for the soup.

9

MOCADÉU BROUGHT THE lamp and sat down with them by the window. Outside darkness had fallen, and here and there lights shone from the houses. Joannon pushed the window half open and leaned out from his seat, his elbow propped up on the table. The wind blew steadily, and with it, the same way, tumbled the hurrying waters of the little stream. A light in a storm lantern erred up and down aimlessly across the bridge, perhaps guiding home a straggling sheep, and then went out. From the tannery down by the water came the sharp odour of bark and currier's grease and the clattering sound of dry hides beating one against another in the wind.

The door opened and the two men came in. They were slim and sturdy fellows in high black cowherds' boots, black leather trousers, and white shirts and scarves. It was difficult to tell them from one another. They looked very much alike. Mocadéu rose to serve them their meal at the table in the far corner.

'Now,' said Joannon across the table, 'if there's any talking, let me.'

The soldier nodded. But there wasn't any. The two men nodded a silent greeting as they passed and during the soup only looked across once or twice, friendly but without much obvious interest. Even without knowing their manner of speech it was clear that they were the strangers in the room and did not expect to be taken for anything else.

'Foreigners,' said Mocadéu, returning to the table and answering Joannon's questioning look. 'Cowmen from somewhere. They come from time to time, not always the same two fellows. Sometimes they buy sheep if there are any going. Just now there are.'

'Since when? I mean, how long have they been coming?' Joannon spoke in a low voice and leaned a little farther across the table. 'I'm asking you for a reason.'

'Well'—Mocadéu screwed up his disjointed face—'on and off, I

should say, for the past six or eight months. And how are things going with you people up there in Roquefort? All right?

'All right. It's a good place. A lordly good place.'

'I'll come and see you one day. Yes, maybe I really will. Sometimes I think I'm getting fed up with this place. But one doesn't move oneself easily. It's because one has memories. Still, I'm alone. I can do what I like. And maybe some memories aren't worth having, eh?'

Rumbling along like this, he was talking more to himself than to the two men.

'D'you ever speak to them?' Joannon asked. 'What do they say?'

Mocadeu looked up, suddenly roused from his musings.

'They? Oh yes, they talk. They take an interest in people. Ask all sorts of names and things. Some people aren't happy if they can't ask a lot of questions.'

'What sort of questions? I'm asking for a reason.'

'Oh, me,' Mocadeu wagged his head. 'I'm not paying much attention to what folks talk.' He turned to Godefroy and grinned. 'If you spend your whole life among sheep, as we do down here, you know, you end up by getting as dumb and dull as they. Sometimes in the morning when I get up and look in the mirror I'm surprised to find I've still got a human face. You wouldn't believe it.' He grinned still more broadly and then chuckled so heartily that it looked as if his jaw were going to fall out. 'It's a fact. One loses one's intelligence.' He nodded happily and crossed his arms on the table.

'Listen,' said Joannon. Bending over the table, he spoke very softly. 'Have they ever been asking after a girl with a little boy?'

'Janine?' Mocadeu asked. 'Sure, on and off. But it's been a good long time since she left here; God bless the girl.'

'God bless the girl?' asked Godefroy.

'Sure. There was a decent hard-working girl if ever there was one. Nothing to touch her, never. I never believed in the whole crooked story, never for one moment. But people are stupid. Duller than sheep, most people are; it's a fact. It was a goddamn mighty colossal injustice, that thing was; God forgive them.' He raised his hands above the table in a clumsy gesture of reproach and dropped them again. 'Wonder what's become of her?'

Godefroy exchanged a glance with Joannon and rose from the table.

'I'm going to lie down,' he said, stifling a yawn. 'You're staying on?'
'Yes, a little,' said Joannon. 'Just for another glass.'
'I'll show your comrade the way,' said Mocadeu.

Once stretched out on the bed, Godefroy found himself so tired that it was difficult not to fall asleep and to wait for Joannon to come up as he was determined to do. For Joannon, he knew, had stayed downstairs for a purpose. The narrow room was under the roof, and its single window looked out on the river, the water mill, and the tannery. The night was noisy. The wind kept blowing with undiminished vigour, the monotonous sound of the water-wheel slapping the water, scooping it up with a loud sucking sound, carrying it splashing and gurgling, and dipping it back into the stream with a swirling gush, the rustling and murmuring of the naked poplars, the bleating of the sheep in the stables below and in the deserted houses on the other bank—it sent him to sleep time and again, and when he woke again and sat up stiffly he found himself in the middle of the oddest of dreams.

He discovered himself, in his half dream, wandering alone across the endless Pachoun, looking in a vain and desperate search for the traces of living man but finding little or nothing that had survived. A few feet of low, tumble-down stone fence told of some one who once, at an unknown time, had tried to map out a field, fence off a pasture in the wilderness, but had given up, beaten by brier and broom, and gone away. Now the grey-brown remnants of a wall, a chimney, a porch tucked away under a couple of ivy-covered sycamores greeted him from afar, and he hurried thither with a beating heart. But when he approached, the modest Mas that had once stood there was but a memory. He stood in front of it, gazing, wondering, and could not understand it. It was his own house, and he had hurried home to it from very far. His mind, his memory knew every inch of detail of its main house, outhouse, stable, shed, porch, courtyard, and arbour, with a dog barking hoarsely from the top of the wall, bees humming in hedge, vine, and honeysuckle, the voice of his child crying from a cradle on the porch, the clanging of the bells as the sheep moved up towards the house from the hillside, and into the chiming the voice of a woman, Janine's, singing sweetly to herself and the solitude of

the summer day—he gazed and wondered and with a broken heart at last continued on his way.

‘Now,’ said the voice of Joannon in the dark, ‘we know at least where they come from.’ He paused and closed the door behind him. ‘Are you awake, soldier?’

‘Yes,’ answered Godefroy. ‘Talk.’

‘They come from Vargelonnes. From beyond the plateau.’

The soldier saw his comrade move about the room on noiseless feet, and as the milky moonlight caught his figure in the window he saw the green starlight suddenly shine up in the shantyman’s eyes.

‘I spoke a few words to them,’ the man at the window said. ‘Just in order to make them talk. When they opened their mouths I knew. That lingo is spoken nowhere else in the world but in Vargelonnes. One is surprised it is spoken at all. It should have been dead hundreds of years.’

‘How do you know it should?’

‘I don’t know. It’s the way it sounds that tells you. I’m not much good at explaining things. But the way they talked reminded me of the cannon ball. It’s a stupid thing to say, perhaps, but it did remind me. Buried; that’s what it is, buried. Well, they try to conceal it. But they can’t. It shines right through. Are you awake, soldier?’

‘Yes. Go on talking.’

‘Mocadeu—there’s no harm in him. Though he likes to pretend he’s much duller than he is. So for the moment there’s no need for him to know just precisely where Janine is.’

‘And the story?’ asked Godefroy.

‘It’s the same as in La Madone, soldier. A put-up job, trying to blame her for things she didn’t do and force her to leave the place. For the rest I’m guessing.’

‘What?’

‘I’m guessing that the embroidered *N* on the jerkins of these two men stands for a name. For the name of their seigneur or patron in whose services they are. And that name would be “Noir.” That man “Noir” is sending out men to discover where Janine has gone.’

‘Is there a man called “Noir”?’

‘I think,’ answered the shantyman, ‘there is.’

‘And where does he live?’

'If he exists,' answered the shantyman, 'his place is called Peira-Colonna.'

Joannon stepped away from the window and came up to the bed. The green starlight in his eyes had gone out. The moonlight in the window had gone. The room lay in utter darkness. Godefroy pushed close to the wall to make room in the bed for his comrade. Joannon dropped his shoes, then his trousers and jerkin, on the floor but kept his stockings on. Their rough, coarse wool tickled the soldier as the woodsman's feet touched his under the blanket.

'You're not worrying yourself, soldier, are you?' Joannon's voice came from the dark beside him.

'No,' he answered.

'Because——'

The remainder of the sentence was never spoken. But Godefroy felt it suspended above the bed and in front of his eyes, luminous in the dark stillness.

'You're meddling in nothing,' he answered softly. 'Because you are my comrade and, also, there's nothing to meddle in.' His own naked foot felt the coarse wool of the other's stockinged feet under the blanket, and he thought: How can I tell you that I like you so well? 'It's like this,' he said dreamily, and was not sure that he actually spoke or only thought to himself.

He slipped his left arm under his head and closed his eyes.

It's like this. Janine and I—that's not like yourself and the daughter of the patron. One knows each other and one doesn't. The way she found me up in the woods, the way I found her, we had both lost our roads, and neither needed to know whence the other had come. Somehow one isn't curious. One doesn't ask more than the day is willing to answer, and often the day doesn't want to be asked at all, nor the next day. So one doesn't learn. One doesn't begin a life, this kind of life, by first living all the dead and buried years all over again. Did I throw away two-score years only for Janine to pick up all the bits and fragments and piece them together again? And did Janine bury one hundred months by the roadside before she climbed the hill of Roquefort only for me to unearth them again as if they were a hidden treasure, which they aren't? No, my comrade. One begins by forgetting, by not knowing. Is last year's storm still raging in this year's summer

sky? Does the oak tree still wear the leaves of a hundred past seasons? A heart full of love has no history. It's as young as a newborn child. It can hardly speak. How can it want to know?

The soldier opened his eyes. He was surprised to find himself awake. He listened into the night and even now was not sure that it wasn't the landscape of his dream into which he was listening. The wind had ceased. Rain was falling densely and steadily, and all other voices had become silent. As he listened to the rain a great sea of immense and unspeakable homesickness swelled and surged around him and bore him back into the warmth and fragrance of sleep.

In the morning Perlus arrived.

He drove across the bridge in driving, whipping rain and careered into the courtyard of the inn in a shower of splashing mud. The men rushed out from under the arcade where they had watched his arrival and helped him drag his horses and high-piled waggon into the dry safety of the shed. Then they pulled the driver inside.

'At last'—he coughed and spluttered, soaked to the skin—'three times my old man made me put off the trip because of the weather, and now that I've come I get a worse time than I should have got before. It just shows you.'

They were in the taproom, Perlus standing in front of the great log fire, the rest of the men gathered round him, and at once, without asking any questions, the young driver proceeded methodically to divest himself of his wet garments. He was a young man of perhaps twenty-five, so Godefroy guessed, ginger-haired, with a thin, reddish moustache and lively pale blue eyes. One by one as he rid himself of his clothes he threw them, with a grin and a laugh, at one of the men standing round. They caught them, dripping wet, greeting each with a volley of laughter: a coat for Joannon, a waistcoat for Mocadeu, a boot and another for Godefroy.

'There, the chambermaids!' cried young Perlus, shivering and in high spirits. '*Diable*, what a time! I thought I'd get drowned.'

A pair of wet stockings flew into Mocadeu's face.

'And how is it up in Villehaute?' asked Joannon.

'The devil's loose, woodsman!' answered the youngster, and the next moment a dripping pair of pants came sailing along.

'Three days ago the snow began melting in the mountains, and now the ice in the rivers is breaking. I've never seen such masses of ice floating down the rivers. What a winter they must have had up there!'

'As long as the bridges hold,' said Mocadeu.

'Yes, the bridges. The Roumégous one is gone. The one below Cogolin is gone, and the Saussette one will be gone by now. That's why I took so long.' His soaked-wet underpants landed safely in Godefroy's hands, and he proceeded to unbutton his shirt but stopped to rub his goose-fleshed calves. 'No means of getting across all the swollen waters. There'll be some spectacle to watch for you people from Roquefort when you get home. How does it go with you up there?'

At last he stood stark naked.

'And now I'll jump into the fire,' he announced.

But Mocadeu, unwilling to tolerate such a climax in his house, had produced a large brown horse blanket. The three men wrapped up the youngster, and, all of them finally seated round the bright fire with glasses of 'fine' firmly established in their hands, they went on to discuss business, the load Perlus had brought for Mocadeu and the men of Roquefort, and the supplies he was to take back to Villehaute. But in the middle of it Joannon said:

'Eh, Mocadeu. Those two fellows of last night?'

'Gone this morning,' answered the innkeeper, and shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he had no idea where they had left for and why.

Joannon gave him a mild, reproachful look, and the lanky man instinctively felt for his jaw, which seemed very loose indeed.

'As I told you,' he rumbled guiltily. 'One loses one's intelligence. It's inevitable.'

In the afternoon Joannon entered the shop of big Père Nicholas, the baker.

'Salute, big Nicholas,' he said, touching the brim of his cocky brown hat with the tip of his forefinger. 'I come with greetings from one Archambault. You remember?'

'The scoundrel,' answered the baker. 'Do I remember!'

For a moment Joannon was puzzled; then he understood.

'Not going so well?' he asked. 'What's wrong?'

The fat baker was standing behind his counter, a grey, flour-covered flat cap pushed back on his round bald skull. Flour also sat, like snow, in his iron-grey moustache and in little white patches on his unshaven cheeks. The shop was empty; he had obviously sold out for the day. The bareness of the shelves and the counter, the empty pair of scales emphasized the sad and sullen mood in which the bulky man apparently found himself.

'The *cafard*.' The baker's voice came up from a deep well of turgid sadness. 'I'm bored. I'm bored with myself. I'm getting on my own nerves. Do you know how it feels, getting on one's own nerves? Terrible. Tell him that when you get back, the scoundrel Archambault.' He looked up, and a small light of interest and curiosity now shone through the thick fog of flour-covered sullenness. 'How is he doing, the *salaud*?'

'He said: "Tell him I'm doing all right, because he'll like to know." That's his message.'

'Like to know,' groaned the baker. He sat down on a stool behind the counter and put his elbows up. 'He's a rude fellow, that Archambault, rude and without feeling. I don't say he's got no heart because he has, but it's made of wrought iron. Mine is like a loaf of bread that's been left lying in the rain. Soaked through and sodden. Wonder how you get on with him, up there. All right, you like him? I'm surprised. No one down here got on with him except me. And then he walks off like that, without a warning, and leaves me behind. We were friends, you know.'

He paused and wiped his moustache.

'I remember it was you who first enticed him away; wasn't it you? Of course it was. Now look at me.' He sighed and then suddenly smiled. 'Still, it's curious you should come in just this afternoon and bring a message from him when it's raining so hard and I'm thinking of him. When it rains like that I always think of him. On days like this one I used to shut the shop and go round to the smithy, and we would sit round his forge and look into the fire. I'd bring him a fougasse, made the way he likes it, with anchovy, and I would watch him eating it and meanwhile look into the fire and feel my heart

slowly get dry again, and then I'd be content. Now there's no one at the damned smithy, and when it rains, as on a day like this—well, on such a day I just remember him, and the *cafard* plagues me like hell. That's why I say it's curious you should come in and bring a message.'

'Nothing curious,' said Joannon. 'I'm here with a comrade and two donkeys. We've been waiting for Perlus. We shan't stop long. Until the rain ceases.'

'And you say he's doing all right?'

Joannon nodded with a smile.

'Think it over,' he said, touching his hat. 'So long.'

The big Père Nicholas stared after him as he approached the door.

'You're a comic one. What do you mean?'

'Nothing.' Joannon shrugged. 'Think it over.'

At the inn he found Godefroy alone with a drink by the fire. Outside the rain was still pouring down, driving past the window in long slanting sheets. The river had begun to rise visibly since the morning and, looking out from the window, Joannon saw that the water-wheel had been stopped. The river by now almost filled the low arch of the bridge. If it goes on raining at this rate, Joannon reflected, the water will be level with the bridge by to-night, and to-morrow morning it will be over it and we shall be cut off.

'Do you think,' he asked, 'we could use a baker?'

'Have you got one?' Godefroy asked back, his head drowsy from the heat of the fire and the drink. 'What kind of baker? A real one?'

'One with a broken heart,' answered his companion. 'He's thinking it over now. But I suppose he's coming.'

The heavy rainfalls lasted for three whole days, and during these three days every one in Terrerouge was marooned. On the second morning, as Joannon had foreseen, the water was over the bridge, and the right bank was cut off from the left. Many sheep were stranded on the other side, as the water drove them up the slope of the hill, and some, in an attempt to get across, were drowned. On the third day the water began to rise in the streets of the village and to fill the cellars. Many of the sheep had to be brought out of their sheds and stables and taken up to the first floors of the houses, where they waited, crowded, wet, and miserable. During the following night the rain

grew thinner, and towards midnight it stopped altogether. The men went out with storm lanterns and in high gum boots to watch the water withdraw from the streets and to rescue some sheep that had broken loose and were in danger of being swept into the river. The water was gone from the village within a few hours, but when the men retired to bed the bridge was still under water, and the river roared and thundered away like an enormous animal in labour.

In the morning the bridge was clear. This was the moment for which the men from Roquefort and young Perlus had been waiting. They had long sorted out their stores, packed up their supplies, and made ready to load the donkeys and be on their way home, each on his own road. Joannon and Godefroy had been away for six days.

Joannon went round to see the baker.

'Well,' he said, 'we're leaving.'

'That goes,' answered big Nicholas. 'As you see, I'm ready.'

He was. He no longer looked like a baker. He had put on high boots, a thick brown coat, and a warm cap knitted of bright red wool which covered not only his baldness but also his ears, neck, and most of his face.

'It'll protect me against the wind,' he explained when he saw Joannon's smile. 'The wind, that's the one thing that never does me any good.'

He had loaded everything he possessed or thought worth taking with him on a large two-wheeled cart which was drawn by a sleepy and uninterested-looking dappled horse. His load included his entire bakery outfit as far as it was transportable, from his kneading trough, baking pans, and pastry boards down to his scales, weights, wicker baskets, and large bread knife.

'Like this I'm complete,' he declared proudly. 'I shall be able to start work the moment I arrive. Do you think they'll be surprised, your people up there?'

'No. But the people down here? Won't they be?'

'Not a bit,' protested the baker, indignant at the merest suggestion that the decision he had taken after so much searching of heart might be unwise. 'I've put a notice in the window of the shop. Don't you see? It says, "*Parti en Vacances* [Gone on holiday].'" Who goes on holiday at this time of year? They'll understand.'

He grinned, happy and cheerful over the prospects of his new life. 'Archambault, the scoundrel, he never even put up a notice. That's what I call hard-heartedness.'

Very few among the not very numerous inhabitants of Terrerouge even noticed the departure of their baker at this early hour of the morning, and those who did see his high-piled cart slowly rumble across the bridge in the company of two men and two loaded asses probably did not recognize the saddest man of Terrerouge in the red-capped, brown-coated, cheerful figure that led the dappled horse out of the little town.

A sharp and persistent wind blew across the Pachoun, much to the baker's discomfiture. It carried with it long dragging veils of infinitely thin moist spray which wrapped themselves round the men and animals like clinging gauze, dimming their eyes and leaving a curiously stale, almost putrid taste on their tongues and lips. The clouds hung low above the ground, and with the advancing day they seemed to descend lower and lower. Towards midday the whole vast desert of broom and gorse and cistus was covered with a dense grey fog. It was impossible to see more than two or three yards ahead and difficult even to see the soaked, soft ground beneath one's feet. The wind continued to rage mercilessly, but it did not succeed in clearing the fog. It merely moved it, in odd and violent blasts, in all directions, tore it up into columns and strips which danced among the brown heather like the risen ghosts of the dead, only to grow together again the next moment into a single moving, shoving, swaying wall of impenetrable wet stickiness. Progress was slow, and the men were tired sooner than they had expected. Big Père Nicholas had become silent and no longer pointed proudly and with a superior grin to his red woollen cap. It stuck clammily, like a soaked sponge, to his head, and with a sigh he finally removed it. Joannon realized that they would not be able to reach La Madone that night and that they would need three days instead of two to get home. Godefroy was impatient; he spoke little, and his thoughts were miles ahead of him. At times he closed his eyes against the fog and dampness and walked blindly beside his ass. Before him then stood the low-ceilinged kitchen at Roquefort, the fire in the hearth, a smell of charcoal smoke, of onions

and baked potatoes, his mended shirt greeting him from the nail in the corner, the voice of Janine, the first words she spoke when he entered the house on his return; he kept trying to imagine them, and again and again they eluded him. He smiled to himself as he walked, happy and disturbingly conscious that he was trying to reconstruct the future as if it were already past.

They spent the night in a deserted Mas at the very edge of the Pachoun. It was reasonably dry inside, and from odd sticks and dead brier which they managed to scrape together despite the swiftly falling darkness, Joannon miraculously produced a fire. It was enough to heat up some sausage and roast some bread and to dry their clothes. In the morning the baker's cap was fit for service again, and he proudly put it on. The fog had dispersed, the wetness gone—but for the cap there was more need than ever. The wind had taken on the force of a hurricane. They passed through La Madone without seeing a soul, but at the pond Joannon stopped for a moment. Three of the giant poplars had succumbed to the storm. They lay, their backs broken, with their crowns submerged in the water. Godefroy watched Joannon's face as he contemplated in silence the distressing sight. Pain, sadness, and mourning stood in his eyes. To him the three trees were three big men who, shot dead through their backs, had fallen on their faces and, to make death doubly sure, had been drowned. To him they were three tall friends whose loss he mourned. He said nothing, and after a moment they walked on.

They were late also on this second day, but Joannon was determined to reach at least St. Saturnin, where they could comfortably spend the night at the inn. But in the late afternoon, about an hour's distance from the village, the sky, which so far had been of a light and unsuspecting grey, suddenly turned to a muddy brown and within the space of a few minutes was pitch-black. Rain came down in torrents. Big Père Nicholas' dappled horse, shivering and panting, stopped in the middle of the road, and the two asses, for once of one mind, followed suit. Under their very eyes and before they had realized the force of the onslaught the men saw their road changing into an ankle-deep morass. They looked at each other, water streaming down their faces, and Joannon shouted something, but amid the thunderous uproar of blasting wind and driving rain it was impossible to under-

stand a word. He pointed backwards along the road, and Godefroy nodded. The large isolated farmstead on the right which they had passed only a short while ago would have to give them shelter for the night whether it liked it or not. There was no question of going on. They turned the animals. Joannon vaguely remembered the name of the place. It was Prat Ramatuelle or something like that, but he did not know who lived there.

The people at Prat Ramatuelle had themselves been surprised by the storm. The farmer let them in without many words and then left them to themselves. He was a short, stocky little man with a round head and short black hair that stood brush-like above his low, rutted forehead, and he was busy, with the help of his son and daughter-in-law, bringing in the animals from the grazing ground and trying to catch some twenty-odd geese which, maddened by the cloudburst and frightened by the sudden darkness, had completely lost their heads and were crazily careering round the courtyards. Joannon and Godefroy, having brought their own charges into dryness and safety, immediately went to the desperate man's assistance and, having successfully co-operated in the chase, earned the farmer's thanks and a small glass of some strong but undefinable drink. The baker, however, utterly disgusted and exhausted and inwardly, the two friends were sure, damning himself for his absurd adventurousness, was unable to move another step. Desperately clasping his drenched red cap like a drowned fowl, he fell asleep in the stable by the side of his dappled companion, and all Joannon was able to do for him was to push a sheaf of straw under his head and spread a blanket over his body. To move the big Père Nicholas even a yard was beyond the energy of anybody that night.

But that night was not yet over.

After some hours of exhausted sleep Godefroy suddenly woke with a start and sat up in bed. From behind the wall came voices. He listened. A loud and angry argument was in progress, and its noise had wakened him. He thought he recognized the farmer's voice who spoke with indignant impatience to some one in the room. That some one answered in a submissive, pleading, yet obstinate tone which obviously exasperated the farmer.

'Get out!' Godefroy heard him shout. 'Pick up your goddamn head and get out. Let me sleep!'

'But it is Tuesday!' pleaded the other voice. 'I always come on Tuesdays. You know it. You've never minded it. And to-night it's raining so hard!'

'Leave me alone,' groaned the farmer. 'I won't have you stay here all night. What difference does the rain make to you? Pick up your head and get out.'

'I can't find it,' answered the other voice. 'You've hidden it.'

'Hidden it? Don't insult me. I wouldn't dream of hiding your bloody head. It's right here on the bedclothes. Take it away and be gone before I get mad. I want to sleep.'

'So do I,' lamented the other man. 'It isn't right for you to push me into the storm. It is uncharitable; that's what it is.' His voice grew more defiant. 'I don't deserve such treatment. I've been coming here every Tuesday——'

'Enough!' cried the farmer. 'If you don't go this very moment I'll take your cursed head and fling it out of the window.'

'Don't——'

'I'll do as I please in my own bedroom.'

There was a moment of heavy commotion, then a dull thud, the splintering of glass, and silence. Godefroy leaped out of bed across Joannon's sleeping body and rushed to the door.

'Now you can go and pick it up outside,' said the farmer drily. 'Let me sleep.'

'I can't. Without my head I can't go. Now I have to stay until the morning.'

This was obviously more than the farmer was prepared to stand. He jumped from his creaking bed, but Godefroy did not wait for more. He slipped out of the room and opened the door of the farmer's bedroom. The farmer had struck a light and was sitting on the edge of his bed, dressed in a red-and-white chequered nightshirt, bathed in sweat, his black bristle hair standing on end. The room was empty, but through the broken window-pane wind and rain came in in furious blasts.

'Hoy, Jacinot,' said Godefroy. 'Where is he?'

The farmer looked about him, perplexed and exhausted.

'Gone,' he stammered. 'Gone, thank God. I guess you chased him away. Without your coming he would have stayed all night. What a fellow!'

He nodded at Godefroy thankfully but suddenly stared at him from glassy eyes as if he had never seen him before.

'Did you just now call me Jacinot?'

'I did.'

'How did you know my name?'

Godefroy closed the door behind him and stepped into the room.

'One called Janine,' he said with a smile. 'Don't you remember her? When I heard the ghost clamouring for his head I remembered the story and knew in whose house I was. She sometimes mentions your name.'

The farmer nodded dispiritedly and slipped back into his bed. He pulled the bedclothes up to his chin and stared at the broken window.

'What a business,' he muttered. 'Thanks for chasing him away. Now let's go back to sleep.'

'Just one minute, Jacinot,' Godefroy said. He stepped closer to the bed. The farmer now stared at him from under his blanket in sheer undisguised fright. 'Don't be afraid. You can do me a service. About this Janine. There's a thing I want to know. When she left you, was it her fault?' Jacinot stared and then shook his head. 'But you dismissed her all the same. You chased her out, didn't you? Why, if she hadn't done anything dishonourable? You'd do me a service if you would tell me—'

'Oh, gracious Lord,' the farmer moaned. 'Now he's starting the same game. Let me sleep, please. Go away and let me sleep.' Little beads of perspiration reappeared on his forehead. 'Your Janine, I know it was a bad business; I'm sorry; it was all not true, but I didn't know.' He had begun to babble rapidly. 'It was a farm hand who slandered her, a fellow I had taken in for the harvest; he had put it about she was having an affair with my son, and they were all up in arms against her, and—'

'I don't want to know the details,' Godefroy interrupted him. 'Just this. A fellow you had taken in for the harvest. A stranger?' The farmer nodded. 'What happened to him? Is he still here?'

'Heaven forbid!' babbled the farmer. 'For Christ's sake, don't stare

at me like that damned ghost. I can't stand any more of this. That farm hand, he disappeared the next day. I've never seen him again. And I'm glad I haven't. I never liked him or his queer manner of speech. Now let me sleep.'

Godefroy nodded.

'And he wore a badge on his jerkin, didn't he? A silver N. Do you remember?'

'Yes,' breathed Jacinot. 'Why do you ask me if you know all the answers anyway? Now enough.'

He reached for the light and blew it out.

'Get out,' he cried in sudden anger. 'Don't start arguing again.'

'Thanks.' Godefroy smiled into the darkness. 'You've done me a great service.'

'Get out. Pick up your goddamn head and let me sleep.'

But the soldier had already left the room.

He crawled back into his bed over his sleeping companion and stretched out under the blanket. He felt curiously light and happy and content. Now he was very near home. To-morrow he would see the old rock again, and a very long journey would have come to its end. His mind travelled back over the eight days he had been away. Only eight days. They were like eight years. They were like a whole life and not his own, which he had relived in this brief span of time. He smiled to himself, conscious of his own happiness. At the end of his journey he had also come to the end of his buried story. He thought of poor old Jacinot and wondered whether he would ever get rid of the man who came on Tuesdays. Poor old Jacinot, he thought. The end of Janine's buried story.

But the beginning? He had not found it. He had not searched for it. Perhaps it lay behind the last bend of the road beyond which he had not travelled. Perhaps another step and he would have come upon it. He wondered. He was not sure that he wanted to know. He fell asleep.

When they arrived at the bridge of Roquefort the following evening the water stood high, and large ice floes were piling up and threatened to block the passage of the turbulently descending stream. The Varouse had swollen enormously. It had broadened to more than

twice its normal width, and only in the gorge between the face of the mountain and the entrance to the city was it still held in bounds. But two or three large blocks of ice had already been thrown on to the bridge by the relentlessly pressing river, and many of the citizens were frantically busy at the other end, in the light of storm lanterns, to clear them away. Godefroy recognized the figure of tall black Rousset Barthélemy, of gaunt Fortescue, of quick-footed Fabri, who dashed hither and thither, pulling and stemming, and of old Archambault, who was as generous with his strong hands as with loudly shouted, cursing advice.

Rain was pouring down in thick, straight, string-like threads as the three men with their cart and three animals waited under the trees on the other side. The night was dark. There was a slender crescent moon, but hosts of hurrying, fleeting clouds of all colours obscured its light most of the time. Joannon, from under the protecting branches of a huge fir, watched as he waited. Never before had he seen such extraordinary clouds. They were grey and black of all shades but suddenly turned a dark inky blue, their fringes a deep purple that gradually changed into flaming red; the next moment they were bright yellow, like flowering lupins, then green, a deep poisonous green, and a minute later it was all black again, the moon covered and gone, and only the storm lanterns darting about.

At last the men on the other side waved their signal.

'Hoy!' cried Joannon through the storm. 'Can we pass?'

'Pass!' It was Rousset Barthélemy's mighty voice that howled back against the wind. 'The animals first!'

'Will she hold?'

'We hope so. Hurry up!'

'We're coming! Can you see? The horse is coming first!'

'Horse! Which horse?'

'The baker's of Terrerouge!'

'Hoy, Nicholas!' shouted Archambault. 'Is it you, really?'

'It's me!' cried the baker, tears of excitement in his voice and forgetful of all his past miseries. 'Here I come, you old scoundrel!'

The rain poured down. Godefroy was last to cross the bridge into the city. It was like stepping aboard a big ship the moment the gang-plank is washed away by the sea. The water was over the bridge. The

ice floes began to come over in masses. Behind him the bridge disappeared in the whirling, crashing maelstrom.

'Well, soldier,' spoke Joannon, his voice coming glistening and wet from the darkness, 'we've arrived. A long journey, wasn't it?'

'Long, like a life,' answered the soldier, suddenly with a heavy heart. 'A good time.'

He peered through the walls of black rain for the light in the woodsman's eyes. He did not find it. Instead he felt his comrade's hand on his shoulder.

'Thinking of what we came across,' said his companion, 'if I meddle once more in your affairs, do you mind, soldier?'

'Speak,' answered Godefroy.

'About one named Le Noir at a place called Peira-Colonna, and his men. There will be time to talk about that. Not just yet. Janine, of course—it concerns her. But the others, better not.'

'Yes,' answered the soldier. 'You know best.'

The hand was withdrawn from his shoulder; a muffled good night came through the rain; good night went back; then slowly the men dispersed and in groups, unseen with their animals, moved up towards the city.

Godefroy, rain streaming down his face, waited for a short moment. There will be time to talk about that, he thought, and wondered. He had no wish to talk about it, neither now nor ever. Not for him, he was sure, not for him to be the messenger of the buried past. The seven dead years of Janine's life had not crossed the bridge with him. If she had discarded them at the foot of the rock, it was not for him to take them up the Bourgade.

Whatever the meaning of the name of Le Noir, he would not resurrect it. Let him come if he can find his way. I shall not show him the road to our threshold.

He walked up the Bourgade.

When he reached the square the rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun. He saw his house and the light in the kitchen window. He brushed his wet, clinging hair from his brow and knocked with a trembling hand and a leaping heart. Swift light steps approached inside.

It was Rémy who opened the door.

Lord, thought the soldier, I've forgotten the present. I've forgotten the boy.

The boy did not greet him. He did not expect a present. Perhaps he had not even expected him to return at all. He stood in the door, small, ill-humoured, and unfriendly, and looked at him from eyes full of that intense and implacable suspicion of which only children are capable.

'Salute,' Godefroy said, trying a smile. 'Here I am.'

But Rémy did not respond. He stood firmly planted in the door. Godefroy, forgetting for a moment his wet and exhausted state, studied his tense little face. Something had happened while he had been away. Something had come to the surface of that face that had not been there before. Or had he, blind in his love, never before seen it?

'Don't you know me any more?' he asked.

It did not work. The boy smiled disdainfully, mocking silently at the childish clumsiness of the question. Don't you understand? his annoyed look seemed to ask. The soldier smiled back helplessly.

'Of course I know you,' the boy said at length. 'Do you want to come in?'

The soldier laughed.

'No, I don't. I want to spend the night out here in the rain. It suits me perfectly. Why, you look at me as if you'd thought I wouldn't be coming back at all. Is that it, or what's the matter with you?'

'Nothing,' answered the boy. 'I knew you were coming back. Your shirt is here. And your pipe. Perhaps you've forgotten them?'

'Be quiet,' answered the soldier calmly. 'This is no way to talk.'

The rain was dripping from his hair across his cheeks and forehead. He was drenched to the skin. He was tired, hungry, and cold. Standing on the doorstep, looking into the lighted kitchen where the fire was burning in the hearth, he felt deserted, lonely, and so deeply hurt that he could have cried. The kitchen was empty. He did not see Janine. Suddenly he felt afraid to call for her. He felt the eyes of the boy watching his every movement. What if she isn't there at all, he thought, not there any more? What if it is all a dream and not true at all? Where had I been and why do I come to this place? This is a

strange little house, and a hostile little man bars my entrance with words of cruel, calculated insult. What have I done?

'Rémy!'

At last her voice, coming from behind the door of the back room, broke the spell.

There was no answer from the boy. Godefroy stepped inside. He looked about himself. Rémy had gone. He had whisked past him, slipped out of the open door, and disappeared into the square.

'Rémy!'

Janine came in.

'You're here!' she cried. 'Godefroy, at last you're here!'

'Yes,' he answered softly, holding her in his arms. 'I'm here.'

Her warm, full face lay pressed close against his palpitating throat.

'Janine, *grappa*. What has happened?'

'Oh,' she sighed, 'I'm content, Godefroy. I'm content you're back.'

A raindrop fell from his tousled hair and ran down her cheek.

'There.' He smiled, wiping it off with his finger tip. 'You're crying.'

She was.

'The things,' Godefroy said from the bench in the half darkness of the kitchen corner, 'the things that must be going on in that little mind. The complicated, tortuous, unhappy things.'

He spoke softly, almost murmuring, anxious not to wake the boy who was now, after a shy and wordless return to the house, fast asleep on his mattress.

Janine shook her head. Kneeling in front of the hearth, she carefully embedded the low-glowing fire in its soft, warm cinders. In this way it would preserve its life until the morning. The church bell struck ten. Outside howled the wind with unabated fury.

'It began,' she said, 'on the afternoon of the day you left. It was the Italian children who put it in his head. For seven years I have dreaded this moment and hoped it would never come. I was stupid; I should have known.'

'What happened?'

'They teased him with questions, the children of Antonio; that's how it started, out there in the square by the fountain. Some one had made them do it. It wasn't their own idea. It was their uncle's,

Napoléon's. I saw him standing at the corner by the church, watching and grinning. It was all his doing. It made Rémy fly into a violent temper. He beat them and thrashed like a raving madman. A small boy. So brutal. So fierce, so cold-blooded, so brutal. He would have killed them all had not their father come to rescue them. Their uncle had run away. But my child, Godefroy? No—no, there was something breaking loose in that little boy that was much older than his seven little years. A terror. Afterwards he began to brood. And then last night he asked.'

She paused and looked up towards him. He had risen from his seat and was standing beside her, a tall, erect shadow.

'He asked,' she continued haltingly, searching for his eyes, '“is the soldier Godefroy my father?” He knew you weren't. But he wanted to hear me have to say no. I answered no and he asked: “Where is my father?” And I answered: “I don't know.” And then: “When is he coming?” And I answered nothing and grew afraid. And then: “Who is my father and what is his name?”'

There was silence, and into the silence, down the chimney, howled the great wind.

'And again I answered nothing.'

She rose from her knees and took the burning tallow candle from the ledge. Its flickering light suddenly cast a wild and terrifying glow over her face.

'But he said: “You're not telling me the truth. I shall find out my father's name and I shall find out where he lives and I shall go to him and live with him. That is what I'm going to do.” He said it, and his little face looked wicked and bad, and I recognized it. It was his father's face.'

She paused again, and the candle trembled in her hand.

'Speak to me, Godefroy,' she murmured. 'Please speak to me now.'

Godefroy took the candle from her hand. The last bend of the road beyond which lay the beginning of the buried story. The flickering candle cast a deep light over the landscape of a hidden, wounded life. I am a coward, he thought, and blew it out.

'I need not know,' he said. 'Don't be afraid, *grappa*; don't be afraid.'

He wanted to say: The seven years are dead, Janine, my beloved.

Was it not yourself who sent me out to bury them? I have done it. They are dead and I have buried them. Don't be afraid.

But he could not say it. Because he felt them, at this very moment, standing about them in the darkness of the room, and each year had a hundred months and ten thousand days, and they would not stay underground.

'And why,' he asked softly, 'why can't you tell him his father's name?'

'Because,' she answered from the darkness, 'I don't know it.'

IO

FABRI, THAT NIGHT, slept with his horses.

'Ho,' he murmured in his dream. 'What's plaguing you?'

It was a modest dream, a little sweet and a little bitter, and he had dreamed it so often that he had grown fond of it. He was looking in by Janine's window while the soldier was away. Janine was cooking the *ratatouille* and she beckoned him in. She put a bowlful of the dish before him, and they sat down together at the table and ate, sometimes looking at each other, but not often. It was the midday hour, and the wind marched round the house. The soldier's shirt hung from a nail in the corner and looked at him, and his forgotten pipe sat on the ledge of the fireplace and looked at him too. That was all, and he disliked being wakened from it.

'There,' he murmured. 'Don't worry yourself.'

He half opened his eyes. It was the dappled one who was restive and nervous and had begun to wake the others. Fabri was not surprised. The baker's horse was fussy and fidgety, like an old woman.

'Keep quiet now,' he mumbled. 'Never heard the mistral blow before? Wait. It's not going to blow for ever. You'll be all right up here. It's just blowing in the spring. Takes a lot of blasting up here, the spring, but when it's here you'll see. Now keep quiet. Nothing's going to happen to you.'

Thus he talked. He couldn't have given a horse a harsh word even

had he felt like it. Not even a fidget like the dappled one who was new and unruly. The horses grew quiet. But Fabri was by now wide awake. He sat up on his mattress and finally rose and went over to Ulysse.

'There,' he said, stroking his mane, 'so you, too, you've noticed something, eh?'

Together they listened.

'Yes,' nodded Fabri. 'That's it.'

He went to the window and looked out. There was still light in Janine's house. The soldier's shadow was moving past the lamp. There was light, too, at Rousset Barthélemy's. They're talking. Fabri thought. They're perhaps not noticing it. He, too, felt like talking to some one, even now in the middle of the night. It was a sharp and painful little longing.

'Wait,' he whispered to Ulysse. 'I shan't be long.'

He opened the door and crossed over to Rousset's house. As he passed the church the light in Janine's window went out.

Now in the darkness, as he lay by her side on the threshold of sleep, Godefroy knew that at last he was going to be told.

As he waited he was surprised to find his mind wandering away, almost playfully, among the meandering paths of an amorous curiosity wherein there was neither envy nor jealousy. He was not curious of the past life of her heart. But since to-night he had become anxious to learn the secrets of her body's early adventures.

Of her beloved body he was for ever curious. Yet even now he had not pressed her, had not asked. It was she who wanted to tell.

'Yes, *grappa*, yes,' he whispered. 'If you will.'

The darkness was liquid and strangely translucent as it moved about the room. On this sea their bed was like a boat sailing a steady and somnolent course towards the dawn of a secretless day. Godefroy was happy, thinking of her eyes, at last unveiled, as they would greet him in the morning.

She stirred and turned her face towards him. Her sleep-flushed cheek now rested gently against his temple.

'He was the first man I ever knew,' she said.

Her voice was light and of child-like, weightless clarity.

'It is true that I don't know his name or who he was. I don't know where he came from. I don't know where he went.'

He listened. As they had lain on the night of their first embrace, thus they were lying now. His right arm stretched out on the pillow, her head resting in the mould of his elbow. Her hair, like a darkly flowering stream of many scents, flowed away over his forearm into the palm of his hand. Warmth was now streaming in a full flood from her thighs into his tired limbs. Her breasts, their firmness warmed like marble breathing under the midday sun, had nestled close to his chest, and now and then the grainy caress of their nipples sent a hot little shudder through his skin.

'It was at Barquemou,' she said, 'and I was seventeen——'

Then she paused.

And Godefroy suddenly remembered the night of his own first arrival. He, too, had he not been nameless that night? Neither of them had known the other's name, or forgotten it in their first kiss—so little had they mattered, so little had they had need of them to recognize each other in the blue dusk among the bowing, beckoning trees. Had they been truly nameless, love would have soon given them names of its own fancy, and time lived together would have filled them with meaning.

Why, then, had he had to remain nameless who had yet left her with a child? Godefroy, who had lived much and loved little in his time until his stray path had led him out of his world into this country beyond time, was not envious of either him or the child. Neither meant anything to his heart which once and for all had ceased to care for the heritage of days past. There had never been a moment when he silently wished the boy to be his own son.

But the image of Janine in the hour of her virginal glory—since to-night, since his return from his voyage through her own painful vagrancy, it haunted him beyond words. Janine, pregnant with the fruit of her rich, generous body, was doubly and trebly lovable to him. To recapture this moment, only to see her, to contemplate her from afar for a brief second as she then was, walking through the ripening field, the flowering meadow, no more than that—he longed for it suddenly with overwhelming nostalgic urgency.

'Speak,' he begged her.

From the darkness of the pillow her eyes smiled at him, grateful and confiding. The secrets of her body were safe with him, safe beyond the need of anxious reassurance. She knew it.

He kissed her and tasted on her lips the dark moisture of the rain-swept night.

'It was at Barquemou,' she began once more, 'and I was seventeen. My parents were dead, and I was alone and in service with the patron of the inn. Barquemou, you must know, is in the Garrée Valley, two days beyond Terrerouge, on the road that leads up from the sea——'

He listened. The wind was still wandering round the house, and there were steps in the square.

In the Barthélemy kitchen Joannon and the patron were sitting up late, talking and now and then listening to the wind. The sons, then Renée, and finally La Mère had one after another gone to bed, leaving the two men to themselves and their muffled gossip in front of the fire.

They were not talking of anything in particular. For that they were both too tired. It was Rousset's fault who would not let the woodsman go to bed. He had missed his company for nine days, and long days they had been. He was childish that way, and he knew it, the father of three grown-up children, but that was how he was. Each time Joannon made a move to retire he thought of a new excuse to keep him.

Another pipe before the fire went out. Another beaker of red wine from the bottom of the big blue jug. Another story of the road.

Suddenly, however, he put down his drink and glanced towards the window.

'What's the matter?' yawned Joannon.

'Listen,' said the patron. 'It seems to me——'

They both listened, and then Joannon nodded.

'Yes. It's nine days to-night. Now it is dropping.'

'We might have a look.'

They opened the door and stood on the threshold.

'There's Fabri coming,' said Joannon.

The long, lanky shadow of the Keeper of the Horses moved across the empty square.

'It's dropping!' he called huskily. 'I meant to call you.'

'We're here,' grinned Rousset.

It was only six or seven hours since the men from Terrerouge had arrived in an uproar of wind, driving rain, and crashing ice. Now the rain had stopped and the wind was falling. The rain was over for good; you could smell it. It would not start again later in the night or early next morning. The ground was still wet, but the air wasn't any longer. The men felt it on their hands and in their faces. There was no more moisture; the air was dry and smooth and warm, and it had begun to move more slowly. After the fury of the early evening the night was now travelling leisurely. It still moved; it had not yet come to rest. But it walked at a gentler pace.

'Yes, that's it,' said Rousset.

He wiped his moustache with the back of his hand and spat into the square. Then he looked at his two friends contentedly.

The falling wind roused La Mère from her sleep.

She opened her eyes and, turning towards the window, listened into the night. The storm was no longer marching in long paces round the house. It was no longer droning and drumming deep down into her sleep. It was going; it had almost gone. The silence that now followed its thunderous march on cautious, stealthy feet, whispering, murmuring, humming stillness that invaded the night from all sides, tepid, many-scented, restless, and irritating, that sudden silence had wakened her.

Ah, she thought, raising her head a little, I should have known. It is the ninth night, and now it commences. With the hard palms of her work-worn hands she felt, under her blanket, for the shapeless heaviness of her tired limbs and withdrew them again. Blessed they whose bodies are now at one with their hearts. They will get off with a small headache and a little giddiness.

She sighed and listened and then called her daughter's name.

'Rée, what is the matter?'

She had heard the faint, halting sobs for some time but had thought it was the retreating wind.

'Are you crying?'

'No, mamma,' answered the girl's muffled voice. 'I had a dream and it woke me up.'

La Mère heard her turn over in her bed, and then again the halting

sobs of swallowed tears. She has buried her face in her pillow, she thought.

'Never mind what you dream to-night,' she called across the dark room. 'It's the wind. Listen. The mistral is dropping. Go and open the window. The sudden silence, it suffocates one.'

Renée obeyed. La Mère heard the soft tread of her naked feet coming towards her across the floor and saw her form, indistinct in her loose nightshirt, outlined vaguely against the window. Cool, rippling night air now came in through the opened window and settled down on the bedclothes and her hands.

'What was it, your dream?' she asked. 'How did it end?'

'It made me afraid. I should not tell.'

She trembled in her fluttering nightshirt and held her palms to her temples.

'He killed him. He slew him dead, and I saw it all.'

'Whom?'

'Joannon. The soldier slew him dead.'

La Mère sat up in her bed.

'No, no,' she muttered hastily. 'Go and have a drink of water. There's a jug on the ledge in the corner. I keep it there for your father when he gets his dreams. Have a drink of water, Rée. I told you, the wind. The silence. It unsettles one and puts things into one's head.'

'Yes,' sighed the girl. 'It made me so afraid.'

'It would have made me afraid too,' answered her mother. 'What a thing to dream. How did it happen?'

'I don't know,' replied the girl.

She was wandering about the dark room, her palms still pressed to her temples.

'It was in a village I've never seen. There was a pond and three tall poplars. And one of them, the middle one, lay with its back broken and its crown submerged in the water. As if it had been shot through the back and, in falling, drowned itself.'

'And what else?' asked her mother. 'A poplar felled by the storm, that doesn't mean anything I know of. You said Joannon.'

'Yes,' answered the girl. 'Joannon. He and the soldier, Janine's man, were standing there looking at the fallen tree, and the fallen tree was Joannon dead and drowned.'

'But he was standing there. It makes no sense, *petite*.'

'The fallen tree was Joannon dead and drowned,' the girl repeated. 'And they were standing there looking at him, and they knew it, and the soldier had killed him, and Joannon as he looked at the tree knew it was he who had done it.'

'No,' interrupted her mother. 'This is a *bizarrerie*. Dreams must have a meaning.'

'It has,' insisted the girl; 'I know it has.' She was near sobbing again. 'I knew it. When I dreamed it I knew it. Now I've forgotten. But it made me so afraid.'

'A *bizarrerie*, that's nothing to make one afraid. Ask your father. He's one who knows about dreams. He has many himself.'

The girl answered nothing. After a while she turned and disappeared in the darkness of the room.

'I'm tired,' she said, and her mother heard her slip back into bed with a sigh. 'I shouldn't have told,' she murmured, almost to herself. 'I thought you'd understand.'

La Mère remained silent. So I should, she thought, worried and sad. I thought I should have been able to understand. A *bizarrerie*. It is a word, only a word. The wind, again it is only a word. Pity those whose bodies are now at one with their hearts, she thought. Because in a night like this they don't understand their children. Pity the stupidity of insensitive flesh. Pity the dumbness of the aged heart.

'Sleep, *ma petite*,' she tried to comfort her. 'Sleep and don't be afraid. You're going to have him soon now, very soon.'

She listened. Renée had fallen asleep. Through the open window she heard the voices of the men talking softly on the doorstep.

'Yes, that's it,' said Rousset.

The breeze brushed gently round the corners of the houses. The mad trembling had ceased; doors and windows had stopped clattering. From minute to minute they felt the air grow thicker in its flow and acquire a milky and soothing quality.

'I've often asked myself,' said Joannon, 'why it is that the mistral is a wind of the night. It is born at night and it dies at night. I've yet to see a mistral spring up in the middle of the day or drop before darkness. Always it arrives and departs before dawn. Not true?'

He shook his head, puzzled, and plunged his hands into his pockets. Obviously he expected no explanation from his companions.

'Me,' said Fabri, 'I've wanted to ask you something. Has any one of you ever been inside the citadel?'

'No,' replied Rousset, and looked automatically across the square where at the far end the big black mass of stone, girdled by its graceful balustrade and crowned by its jagged battlements, rose defiantly into the night. 'Have you?'

Fabri shook his head.

'And I don't suppose there's much one would find in there,' Rousset suggested. 'As a matter of fact, it never occurred to me to have a look inside, bolted, barred, and locked as it is, the old barn. One would have to ask Archambault to break it open. Why do you ask?'

'You wouldn't think it likely there are any horses inside?'

'Horses?' Joannon laughed. 'He's suspecting horses everywhere! Why, have you seen any come out?'

Fabri smiled good-humouredly.

'No. But I've heard them inside. Or at least so it seemed to me. The other night when you were away. There was a neighing and yapping and snorting and roaring going on in there, and hooves pounding the ground as if from a hundred horses, and no mistake about it. It sent me into a proper fright because I thought, How the devil have my boys got in there? I made for the stable, but they were all there, asleep, and it hadn't been them. Then I go back to the citadel and listen, and again there's no mistake; the noise comes from in there, and after a while it stops, as if the beasts had been walked off, and I hear no more. That's why I say I wonder what's in there.'

'Your bad dreams, my friend,' said Joannon. 'Go on. How could there be a hundred horses in there?'

Fabri shrugged his shoulders and wrinkled his brow.

'How do I know? It worries me.'

'What worries me at the moment,' interrupted Rousset, 'is what is happening to that old bridge of ours. Just listen.'

The wind had dropped to a low, liquid whisper.

'He came in through the bead-string curtain straight from the street one day in August just before noon. I was alone in the taproom, rinsing

some glasses, and he walked straight up to the zinc. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and strong, like a pirate. He was a young man, but his black Arab beard made him look older, and in his black jacket with its silver buttons, his black trousers and high black boots, he looked like one from a foreign land. The dust of the road was on his boots and on the broad rim of his strange, outlandishly curved hat. Never had I seen one like him at Barquemou before or anywhere else, and never have I seen one since. He seemed to have landed from a foreign ship and was on his way inland. He had walked for many hours and fast. He was in haste and seemed to be anxious to continue on his way, wherever he was going. He flung his hat on the zinc and, one elbow on the counter, wiped his dusty, sweating brow with his free hand. He looked at me for a time that seemed endless to me from black, shimmering eyes under black, bushy eyebrows in a dark, tanned face. I trembled under his look and dropped a tumbler I was holding, which broke on the floor. He laughed as if he were drunk. From that moment I was afraid of him, so deadly, so senselessly afraid, as I've never been afraid of anyone before or since. He reached for his pocket and flung a silver piece on the counter and said: "*A menthe à l'eau.*"

He drank it in one gulp and asked for another and drank it more slowly and began to talk. His voice is in my ear to this day. It was foreign and not from this part of the world. It sounded like the wild, cruel music of a large forest in the wilderness when the autumn storm plays the great organ of the woods. Then again it sounded like great boulders rolling and rumbling from the mountains down a dry, waterless river bed. Then like the crashing and splintering of storm-broken trees, then like water bursting through a suddenly opened weir. Never have I heard such a voice in anyone human. I felt it weigh on my shoulders and press them down in fearful humility and I needed all my strength to hold myself up. It ran down my body, inside my clothes, and my skin felt stung and poisoned in all its pores. It made my head swim and made me want to cry with mortal fear.

He said: "I'm not staying long and you are coming with me, so make haste. Don't ask me who I am because I shall not tell you now, but in time you will know and you will not regret having come. I'm on my way to the land of my ancestors, and this land you will like. Don't ask me now where it is or what it is called because I will not tell

you ere we get there, but it is not far, and you will live in a large house amid great riches. The house I shall build for you and the riches will spring from the vast land that has come to me from my forebears. You will lack nothing, and the sons you will bear me will be great and strong men and powerful all over the land. All that I promise. Come and make haste. I have waited these fifteen years for the day of my return. Three days ago I landed from a ship at the port of La Théoule and since then I have travelled forty leagues a day. I shall not be tired until I arrive. Pour me another glass. I'm thirsty, the dust of your roads has coated my throat with a mean, musty taste. Great injustice has been done to my forefathers, their lands have been robbed; their house has been destroyed, and all their descendants but I have perished in poverty and servitude. I have survived. I have brought great wealth from foreign shores and now, after these fifteen years, I have returned. When I landed from the ship I vowed that I would find a wife before the sun had thrice sunk. To-day is the third day. When I passed this house and looked in by the window I knew you would come. You are alone in this world as I am; you have neither father nor mother as I have not, and you're ripe like the autumn grape, and I am picking you. Speak, that I can hear your voice." And I summoned my strength from the depth of my fear and all my courage from the seas of despair that were around me, behind the zinc at the inn at Barquemou in the hot midday hour of August, and I answered: "No. Go away."

'And he went. He emptied his glass and put on his hat and walked to the door. There he stopped and turned round, and the sun fell through the head curtain and cast a wild and terrifying pattern on his face. And with his rumbling voice that sounded like the thunder in the womb of the earth, he said: "You will come. I shall return within the hour to fetch you. Do not try to hide from me because I shall find you, wherever you are." And he left.

'I knew he was going to return. It was the midday hour at harvest-time, and I was alone and the village deserted. There was no one near to help me, no one to ask, no one to speak to. Before the hour was out I saw him come down the village street straight towards the house and the curtained door. I stood behind the zinc, petrified, until the moment his shadow fell across the doorstep. Then I fled. I ran through

the house, from room to room, from corner to corner, and his steps followed me everywhere. I found nowhere to hide and once, when for a moment I no longer heard his steps wander searchingly about the house and all was silent and he seemed to be gone, I slipped out by the back door and across the courtyard and into the barn. I locked the door behind me and turned round and saw him standing before me in the dim, shady light, leaning against a high stack of hay, his black coat thrown off, in white shirt sleeves rolled up. his tanned, hairy arms to their elbows, and waiting for me.

‘How can I tell you what happened then? “So you’re not coming?” he asked, and I answered: “No. Go away.” and he said: “If you’re not coming to-day you will come to-morrow. If you’re not coming to-morrow you will come next week. Or next month or next year. But come you will. I shall not wait for you now because you will find your way alone. Come nearer,” he said, and stretched out his arms, “so that I can give you a present now and a pawn by which to remember me, and this one day you will bring back to me. You will not rest until you have returned it into my hands, and the farther you will try to flee from me, the nearer you will get to me. One day you will come. All that I promise you.” Thereafter he came forward and pressed me in his arms. He tried to kiss me, and I closed my lips against him, but he bit them until they bled and opened them with his teeth, and the flames of hell poured down my throat and choked me. He pressed me down on to my knees and down into a deep sea of hay and tore my clothes with one rip so that I lay naked before him, and he forced my limbs, and again the flames of hell poured through my bleeding wound into my crying body. And his voice spoke into my ears: “This is the pawn and the present I give you.” Terrified, I stared into his eyes. In them I saw that he loved me.

‘That is why I wanted to kill him. My hand, searching desperately among the hay, had got hold of something, a little thing, sharp and pointed, a grape-picker’s knife, and this I thrust blindly and with all my strength into his face. He shot up like a bolt. He yelled and howled like a dying horse; his hands rushed to his gashed face, and thick red blood came dripping down between his fingers. He flung his shoulder against the locked door, crashed through it, and fled. I never saw him again.’

Janine paused.

Stillness, utter silence hung about them. They listened, and Godefroy felt her breath, calm, even, and unperturbed, flow through his own body. A small liquid whisper alighted on the window sill, swished through the dark room, and flew out again.

'I know,' said Janine, 'that it doesn't sound true. But it is. It doesn't sound like something that happens nowadays, but it happened. He left me his pawn and his present. He left me a silver coin with which to pay for his drinks, but it was a foreign piece and of no value, and the patron made me replace it from my earnings. And he left me the child, and when the child was born in loneliness and without love they made me quit Barquemou, and I had to go into service elsewhere. Since then I've been going from place to place. Always it began friendly; always in the end it turned wrong.'

'I know,' answered Godefroy, 'because I met you on the road, *grappa*; I walked the whole way with you. Month after month, year after year, I met you; don't you remember? You were waiting for me at each crossroad, and you greeted me in each open door. Each time I recognized you with a smile and a kiss. Don't you remember?'

'I remember,' she breathed. 'Until we came here. And now——'

'And now,' he answered, 'sleep, my beloved. Listen into the night.'

'Yes,' she breathed. 'The great storm is over.'

The storm was over.

But into the silence, coming up the Bourgade from below, now droned and thundered the roar of the swollen river and the crashing and splintering, the pushing and shoving and screaming of the ice. The torrent of snow water from the glaciers of Vargelonnes had not decreased. Steadily it kept on throwing its mounting cargo of ice down the gorge of the Varouse and against the rock of the sleeping city and at regular intervals sent long and needle-sharp icy whiffs through the mellowing air of the budding spring night.

'I'm going to have a look,' said Rousset Barthélemy. 'It's beginning to sound dangerous. You coming along?'

'I've got to turn in,' answered Fabri. 'The boys are restive because of the change of the weather. That baker's mare is the devil of an old

fuss-pot. Makes the other ones nervous too. Still, it's a horse. Good night. Call me if you want help.'

'Good night,' answered the others, and descended the Bourgade.

Their heavy steps approached, passed, and departed.

'What's the matter with you?' asked Archambault. 'Can't you sleep?'

He looked up and saw the black and bulky shadow of big Père Nicholas move about near the window.

'Some one's just passed,' said the baker apprehensively.

'Ah, lie down and sleep. Probably Rousset having a look at the bridge. The ice is going high.'

But the baker would not move away from the window.

'And the wind is down,' he announced. 'Listen. It's dead silent.'

'So much the better,' grunted Archambault from his corner by the forge. 'I was beginning to get sick of it. Of the mistral you can stand just so much and no more. Come on, lie down and sleep. Aren't you tired?'

'I am,' sighed the baker. 'Dreadfully tired. But I'm also worrying about my horse.'

'Your horse is all right,' answered the blacksmith, on the verge of getting annoyed. 'Fabri is looking after it. He's famous for horses, that one. Lie down now.'

The baker's shadow had at last moved away from the window and was now wandering aimlessly about the smithy.

'Do not quarrel with me, please,' his meek voice pleaded humbly from somewhere in the dark. 'I'm trying to find my bed.'

'*Sacré*,' grunted the blacksmith. 'If you hadn't got up you wouldn't have lost it. What a pack of trouble you are. And me thinking I would have a good time with you keeping me company.' He sighed despairingly. 'Man is the victim of his illusions. That's a colossal truth, that is. Aren't you content, Nicholas?'

But there was no answer. The wandering shadow had disappeared. Thank heaven he's found his bed and is asleep, Archambault thought. To-morrow he must find himself his own house; most decidedly he must. The fire of the forge, carefully sheltered and nursed for the morrow's work, spread a faint red glow through the smithy. It

mingled with the grey of dawn that began to filter through the window. Presently the sun would rise above the mountains of Vargelannes in a great God-sent cloudburst of light. Archambault rose and put on his clothes.

Silently he opened the door, slipped out and walked up to the square.

In the greyness of dawn Fortescue lay in his bed asleep and dreamed.

He dreamed that in the greyness of dawn he lay in his bed asleep, but his sleep was light and thin, like the rising mist of the approaching morning, and in it he heard steps wander about the house. They were light steps and made little noise, but they were sharp and distinct, and he heard them, deep down in the house, come up the stone stairs from the cellar and through the hall and up the wooden staircase to the upper floor and cross the landing. He was wondering who it was coming up from the cellar to his bedroom to see him at this hour, when the door to his room opened with a screech of its rusty hinges and some one entered. I must wake up, he told himself then, and see who it is. He opened his eyes.

The mists of dawn, silvery like a spider's web, filled the room and shrouded the figure of a very small man standing close to the bed.

'Ah, it's you,' said Fortescue, sitting up. 'Please close the door.'

'It's not worth the trouble,' answered the stranger. 'I shall be gone in a moment.'

'All right. And what is it?'

The little man shrugged his shoulders and produced what seemed to Fortescue a most odd and quizzical smile. It made Fortescue wonder whether he really knew the man. He was incredibly old; his leathery face was deeply furrowed with wrinkles from which grew a profusion of strangely tufty, white-flowering weed. Of course it is his beard, Fortescue thought, but it also grows on his head and on his hands and wrists, and it almost looks as if it grew even from the wrinkles and creases of his leather trousers and high boots.

'You've grown very old, you know,' he said.

The old man agreed with a grave nod. Fortescue wondered and looked at him again. The man carried several interesting things. A large leather satchel, for instance, embossed on its flap with a royal

coat of arms and crown, which hung from his shoulder and dangled somewhere in the neighbourhood of his knees. And also a very large, black, and belly-shaped bottle with a big and finely chiselled silver stopper. This he held pressed under his arm.

'I hope you don't mind,' Fortescue said, 'but I'm not quite sure who you are.'

The visitor seemed disappointed but said nothing.

'You're not one of the little fellows who come to see me from time to time, are you, the Duke of Burgundy or Prince Grimaldi or——'

The man shook his head.

'No, no,' he answered with a rasping, brittle voice. 'You forget. You're getting things mixed up. It's understandable because it is so long ago. Not since I gave you my house have I been here, not inside.'

'Not since you gave me——' In momentary bewilderment Fortescue combed his wild mop of red hair with his spread fingers. 'Yes, of course. Besides, the Duke is rather smaller than you, and Prince Grimaldi is a stout man, almost fat. I can't say that I'm getting on too well with the Prince. The Duke I like. He's good company. But the Prince plays tricks. That reminds me——'

'Ah?' the visitor asked.

'Weren't there three of them, to begin with? The Duke, the Prince, and—— You know, it's very early in the morning and I'm still half asleep. What about the third fellow? He never turned up.'

The visitor looked worried.

'Try to remember,' he said earnestly.

'Yes, of course,' Fortescue apologized. 'It's me. It's funny, isn't it, that I should have waited for myself all this time and wondered why I didn't turn up? But you're right. It's because it's all so very long ago. And so early in the morning. Why don't you sit down?'

He leaned back on his pillow for a moment and looked at his visitor from half-closed eyes. The man remained standing.

'I know who you are,' Fortescue then said. 'Now I know.' A large grinning smile spread over his wood-carved face. 'You're the fellow who's missing in my book, aren't you? What's his name?'

'Think,' said the little man.

'Tressaille!' Fortescue exclaimed, punching the bedcover with his fists. 'At last I've found you. Bertrand de Tressaille! Right?'

The visitor beamed with delight.

'Right!' he exclaimed raspingly. 'And how do you like my house?'

'Your house? Oh yes, I forgot. It's a good house. Awfully kind of you to let me have it.'

'I'm honoured,' answered the man called Tressaille. He bowed deeply and almost dropped his big bottle.

'I hope it doesn't inconvenience you too much?'

'Not at all. I have another modest place where I stay when I'm here. Which isn't often.'

'I'm sorry. You're very busy nowadays, aren't you?'

'Not so busy, sire, as I used to be. But busy enough. I'm old, but I can still fulfil certain duties.'

'I'm sure you can,' said Fortescue. 'Still, I ought to think of moving out and letting you have back your place.'

But Tressaille raised his hands protestingly.

'As you wish. But it's rather a long time since I moved in.'

'Four hundred years.'

'As long as that?'

Tressaille nodded.

'I must be going now,' he murmured. 'But before I go I must say why I came.'

'Please do. Why did you come?'

The old man stepped yet a little closer to the bed, and Fortescue could see that he felt uneasy and embarrassed. The mist of dawn which came floating in through the open window had become denser and less transparent, and though his visitor stood very near him now, Fortescue could see his face less clearly than before. It annoyed him.

'It is a painful matter, sire,' murmured Tressaille, now visibly perturbed. 'And I must offer my apologies. It concerns this bottle which I hold under my arm.'

'What's wrong with it? Don't you like it?'

'I liked it too much; that's what is wrong with it. I liked it so much that I stole it from you. Yes, it is a very dishonourable business, and I'm profoundly sorry for it. I took it the night of your arrival. It was inexcusable. I've had it all these years, and I am deeply ashamed, sire.'

'Don't call me "sire," please,' interrupted Fortescue. 'It doesn't suit me. I'm an Englishman and not a king.'

‘Not a king?’

Tressaille stared at him in open horror and amazement. Then he smiled.

‘You mustn’t get things mixed up,’ he said warningly. ‘Of course I understand. One goes under all sorts of names nowadays. Myself, for instance, just now I go under the name of the Centurion. It is because I’ve come down in the world, because I’m no longer what I was. Still, I have a hundred men and a hundred horse and I can do what is required.’

‘That’s good,’ answered Fortescue. He brushed back his hair. ‘So you pinched that bottle from me? Very interesting. You must have had it for a long time. In fact, I don’t think I missed it at all. One has all sorts of things. What’s so good about the bottle?’

The Centurion had taken it from under his arm and was now holding it by its neck with both his claw-like hands.

‘It’s the wine in it,’ he said gravely. ‘I’m astonished you don’t remember. The wine of the past and the future.’

‘Ah?’ inquired the man in the bed. ‘Any left in it?’

‘Plenty. It is always full.’

‘Ah yes, I seem to remember. There’s a trick to it, too, isn’t there? One must never drink more than two gulps; wasn’t that it?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Centurion. ‘The first gulp makes one see one’s past. The second the future.’

‘Have you tried it?’

‘Often. It always works. One night I let a man in this town whom I met in the square drink from it. One named Barthélemy. But I allowed him only the first gulp. It worked with him too.’

‘And what,’ inquired the man in bed, ‘is the difference between the two? Between the past and the future?’

The Centurion stepped very close and deposited the bottle on the cover of the bed.

‘Very peculiar,’ he said solemnly. ‘There is none. They look the same. Try.’

But Fortescue suddenly grew nervous. He shook his head and tried to push the bottle off the bed. The Centurion caught it before it fell.

'No, no. Take it away. I don't want it.'

'But I've brought it back,' the Centurion explained. 'I am returning it, because my conscience——'

'Very nice of you, but never mind, I don't want it. I'm not very interested. Take it away. You can keep it if you like it so much. After all, you've had it for a very long time, and I'm somewhat in your debt, on account of the house.'

'I'm honoured,' answered the Centurion. 'Now I must go. The sun will rise any moment.'

Fortescue saw him retreat through the mist towards the half-open door. His form became more and more indistinct. He was not quite sure even whether he was still in the room.

'Are you still there, Tressaille?' he asked.

'Yes,' came the rasping voice from afar. It had grown thinner and thinner and was now almost inaudible. Fortescue thought it came from the staircase outside.

'Listen, Tressaille!' he called through the mist.

Oh, damn it, he thought, he's gone. And I wanted to ask him so many things. How he got here from Les Baux, and what he's got in his satchel, and——

He jumped out of bed and, forgetting his *espadrilles*, hurried after him on his naked feet.

The staircase was empty. He heard the quick light steps of his visitor on the landing below, but when he reached the ante-room the man had gone, and the next thing was that he heard him on the stone steps leading to the cellar. What the devil is he doing down there? he thought. That's not the way out. But still, he ought to know; it's his house, after all. He descended into the cellar and looked about. The man was gone. There wasn't a trace of him.

Disappointed and suddenly very sleepy, Fortescue went back to his room on the upper floor and sat down on his bed. The mist had cleared, and the first rays of the awakening sun came slanting across the ivy-covered balcony.

I must make an effort and wake up, he told himself. I really must wake up. It is already morning. What an astonishing dream! I must tell Rousset about it. He says he met the fellow before, and in the flesh. I wonder whether it is true about the bottle. Whether there is

such a thing and Barthélemy really had a drink from it. But first of all I must wake up.

He let himself sink back on his bed and fell asleep again.

The sun awoke triumphantly, with a dazzling shower of light. Godefroy opened his eyes. He lay facing the window. The room was still hung with the veils of dawn ebbing away; but outside, in the square, glittering golden spray danced silently in shimmering turbulence across window panes and over cobblestones. There was not a breath of wind. Now and then a long silvery drop would slowly fall from the fountain's mouth into the shallow gritstone basin. The tall agave stood motionless in front of the low curved balustrade, rearing its withered body longingly towards the descending pollen of the heavenly sunflower. Two dogs came wandering round the corner. They stopped at the fountain and lapped up the little puddle they found in the basin. A ruffled hen appeared on the balustrade, sent out a few sleepy cackles, but when the dogs paid no attention withdrew again. Presently there was a sound of a key turned in its lock. The door of the inn opened, and Madame Rose, her towering coiffure magnificently tidy, appeared on the threshold, balancing a small goblet between thumb and forefinger. She held the glass against the sun, contemplated for a blissful second its pale golden contents, and emptied it slowly. The two dogs watched her appreciatively. Madame Rose wiped her moustache and nodded to them. From the open door of the inn came the smell of freshly made coffee.

II

NOW THE SUN stood high above the land, and each day it rose higher.

In the morning the clearings in the great woods all around smoked like heaps of smouldering ashes. The vapour rose in columns among the trunks of the trees and fluttered above the head of the wood like the tattered pennons of a hundred lances hidden in the thicket.

In the winter scars of the pastures below the rock many new and fresh sources sprang up, singing their hundred muffled songs as they sent their meandering streams criss-cross over the sloping fields and

down towards the tramping river. The ice was gone. The river had devoured it all, and no more was coming now. But its body had swollen to enormity over the furious repast of spring, and the river dragged its howling, pain-stricken belly in blind, revengeful helplessness across the land.

The bridge of Roquefort had stood the test. After four days it emerged again from the waters, battered and half drowned, but still on its feet. It had sunk in a little at the far end because the sodden soil had sagged, and one of the poles on which it rested had been cut through by the ice. But it still stood, slightly askew and looking slightly drunk, and the damage would soon be repaired.

The sun rose and rose, and the waters fell. It was a fat, many-coloured sun, at times almost rust-red, and it reminded Godefroy of the soil of Terrerouge. Its light grew heavy and so hot that gradually, by its weight, it smothered everything into silence: sound and movement, voices and gestures. Now a great stillness was suspended over the woods and the Land of the Hundred Hills. Twigs and branches, still leafless, glittered with a thousand small silver flames. But the buds were already there, fat and swelling, and they all burst at once. Down along the banks of the river the reed was shooting up its slender new blades, and on the hills beyond broom and cistus stood in full bloom of their red, white, and yellow flowers. A thick fragrance of sap and bark wafted across the valley from the gorge of the Varouse, and with it appeared the birds. The ravens were first. Thrush and swallow followed, warbler, white-throat, and robin descended in swarms upon the rock and busied themselves among the thick carpet of lichen, clematis, and ivy. A flight of seven wood pigeons appeared over the city, circled its roofs several times, and finally, with great laughter, settled among the battlements of the citadel, where it remained.

It grew hot. Gradually the sun recovered its natural colour, and with it came the quietude of peaceful days. The season established itself in broad, immovable solidity. The woods were covered with foliage and now looked two or three times their former size. Before they had been no more than a black wooden fence against the sky. Now they were fully expanded and blocked the horizon.

The men discarded their coats and scarves and rolled up their shirt

sleeves above their elbows. Madame Rose put three rickety tables, two benches, and three chairs out in the square in front of the Sieur de Roquefort. The fountain now spent its water generously. It was clear and sharp as ice; it smelled of the mountains and had a vigorous taste of rock, earthen salts, and clean young moss.

'That,' said Nicholas, the baker, admiringly, 'dumbfounds me. How does the water get up here?'

'I've asked myself the same thing,' agreed Archambault.

He was on the best of terms with his old friend now that the baker had found a house of his own and installed his bakery.

'It's an unnatural phenomenon,' asserted the baker.

Joannon, who passed, gave him a good-humoured smile.

'Not all the things, Père Nicholas, for which there is no precedent in the venerable township of Terrerouge are by necessity unnatural. This here is quite simple.'

'Explain,' demanded Archambault, always annoyed by other people's considered language.

'Well,' said the woodsman, 'the water comes down from the mountains in a thousand subterranean streams and rivulets, and as it comes from very high it comes with great pressure. Now at the point where the mountain-side meets the rock the water is pressed up into the rock. Yes, right into the stone. For the stone you mustn't imagine as a solid block. It's more like a sponge with a million little fissures, crevices, and tunnels, and through these the water is pressed upwards. In some spots, inside the body of the rock, these crevices have been washed, in many years, into larger cavities, into quite large holes or basins. Of course one doesn't know because one cannot get inside, but that's the idea, and the water that is pressed upwards gathers in these basins and fills them up.'

'Simple,' he calls it,' remarked Archambault. 'I'm asking myself how he knows.'

'I know no more than every miner knows,' answered Joannon. 'You people don't know the mountains. Or you wouldn't be puzzled.'

'Go on,' urged the baker.

'Well, now, when the snow melts much water comes down with much pressure, so much water gathers in the channels, and the basins of the rock are full. In the summer, when little water comes down,

pressure is low and little is gathered, and, when it gets dry, none at all. And when the basin is pumped empty the fountain dries up.'

'But,' interrupted Archambault.

'Let him explain,' said the baker angrily.

'I know your but,' answered Joannon, amused. 'How did the fellow who bored this well know the exact spot where he would hit one of those basins? Half a yard to either side and he might have missed it and bored right into the heart of the earth without hitting a drop. How did he know this was the spot? That we shall never know.'

'There you are!' said the blacksmith.

'Never mind,' said the baker, quite overawed. 'You've explained it well.'

'I should say he's explained it in a very complicated way. But,' shrugged Archambault, 'on the whole it's understandable. The old boy, he must have known a trick or two, anyway.'

'Get out of the way!' a voice suddenly shouted. 'Out of the way, the three of you!'

'What do you want?' the blacksmith shouted back. 'Can't one stand here and discuss a problem?'

'Discuss it elsewhere,' answered Jaubert. 'There's a game of boules going on; don't you see?'

'Ah!'

The wooden ball came rolling along between their feet and put an end to their conversation. None of the three would have dared to incite the wrath of the players of so venerated and almost sacrosanct a game as boules by interfering, through their misplaced presence, in its scientific execution. Cautiously the three men stepped aside and lined up with a group of experts already assembled in front of the inn. Reverently and critically they followed the game, blinking against the sun and smoking their caporals.

And now Fortescue emerged from the Goulette.

Tall and gaunt, with mockery in his piercing blue eyes and a broad grin on his wood-carved face, he had risen from his winter's sleep. The citizens had not seen much of him during the days of darkness, cloud, storm, and general hibernation. Now that he reappeared, dressed, as always, in his corduroy trousers, *espadrilles*, and chequered tweed coat, leaning on his stick and walking with a slight limp to

Madame Rose's, where he sat down in the sun, a bright green *menthe à l'eau* before him—now the citizens who greeted him with happy shouts and a waving hand noticed to their amazement that he had grown a beard.

A beard indeed. It was a triangular, neatly shaped and pointed goatee which covered his large, jutting nutcracker's chin and shone in a curious red, not unlike the fur of the fox.

'Ho, Fortescue!' exclaimed Fabri, who, unmindful of the game in progress and to the fierce annoyance of the players, was leisurely crossing the square in the company of his faithful Ulysse. 'Now you look right!'

'Right!' cried young Gaspard Barthélemy, weighing the ball in his right hand between his bent knees and about to throw. 'Right like the King of France!'

They laughed, all of them, and the gaunt man behind his green goblet grinned back. Then suddenly they became conscious again of the unpardonable disturbance Fabri had caused.

'Get out of the way!' cried old Gidéon indignantly.

'Hoy, you and your horse!' exclaimed Jaubert.

'Move yourselves!' shouted Modeste.

'Hurry up!'

'Ohé, move on!'

But Ulysse, the horse, was not to be moved. He had taken a sudden deep interest in the man behind the glass with the green drink. He stepped closer and stood staring at him from wide and puzzled eyes. At last he gave the King of France a quiet and appreciative nod and lumbered off.

Whereupon the great game of boule was resumed.

The great game of boule was played every evening, and the longer the days grew as spring broadened into summer, the longer grew the game. In the daytime the square and the city were almost deserted. The life of Roquefort and its contented citizens had flowed out into the fields and pastures that surrounded the old rock like a many-coloured, gently undulating sea of fertility. From the vineyards up on the slopes, from the banks of the pacified river came the echo of their far-away voices through the breathless stillness of the summer day.

All hands were needed; all hands were there now that the Land of the Hundred Hills was about to burst into the fullness of its riches. Few people were about the city—old Archambault, who was for ever mending, repairing, adapting the tools of harvest in his smithy; Nicholas, who was enthusiastically at work in the darkness of his bakehouse at almost all hours of the day and night; some of the older women, like La Mère and Madame Rose; some of the children who were left behind by their mothers to look after their baby brothers and sisters. Heat and stillness brooded over the empty square, and the wood pigeons strutted about on the deserted benches and tables in front of the inn in grave meditation.

Towards five o'clock the return of the citizens began. In small groups they came up the Bourgade, trickled away into the side streets and alleys, and disappeared into their houses. Invariably the Italian brothers were the first to come home. Invariably Rousset Barthélemy, indefatigable and inexhaustible in his labour and love for the land of his forefathers, was last. Voices sprang up here and there in the square; the hundred busy noises of the approaching evening sounded from open doors and windows; the cries and laughter of the children filled the alleyways. Archambault arrived at Madame Rose's, had his anisette standing at the zinc, and proceeded to take the balls out into the square. No one knew where the balls had originally come from, who had brought them, to whom they belonged. They were common property and, by general agreement, in Madame Rose's trusted custody.

Soon afterwards the other players arrived, and with them the spectators. The players stood about gossiping for a while and waiting for Fabri and his friends to pass. Meanwhile the burghers assembled behind their drinks in front of Madame Rose's; others lined up at a respectful distance or sat down on the balustrade of the citadel, dangling their legs, or else, if they were inhabitants of the square, squatted on their doorsteps, their arms folded on their crossed knees, their caporals firmly stuck to their upper lips. At last the Keeper of the Horses arrived with his troop, himself astride his mighty Ulysse, and crossed the square and playground on his way to the stable behind the citadel, amid shouts and laughter and quips. Now at last the great game could begin. Silence descended on the square, only occasionally interrupted by the mutterings and murmurings of the players. Slowly

the evening sank; lights appeared in the windows; the crowd of spectators grew thinner; the church bell struck seven and then half-past; mothers appeared on their doorsteps, calling the younger children in; wives beckoned their husbands to turn in for the soup. One after the other the players dropped out as the light began to fade, and in front of Madame Rose's the drinkers of anisette and vermouth cassis clustered together and began to talk.

Archambault, grunting good night to the last of the players gathered the balls, took them into the inn, and, returning with a filled glass, sat down and joined the discourses in their argument.

'You see,' said Godefroy one evening, 'he's forgotten all about it. Children have short memories.'

But Janine answered: 'No. They have very long memories. He pretends to have forgotten. But he hasn't. He has a plan.'

They were sitting together on the flat, low steps leading up to their door, Godefroy on the higher step, Janine on the lower, her elbow resting on his updrawn knees. The church bell had just ceased striking eight, and its last stroke was still lingering in the air. Dusk was falling rapidly, and the little houses were casting long shadows across the empty square. The game of boule was over; the players had retired into their houses. Later, after dark, they would gather again round the zinc at Madame Rose's.

'A plan to do what?' asked Godefroy.

'One never knows. Children work out things in their minds after their own fashion and according to their own rules. They aren't the rules of the grown-ups. They have a logic of their own.'

Godefroy nodded. He knew well it was true.

The square lay in silence. Only the occasional mutterings of the arguers in front of Madame Rose's and the voices of the children now and then disturbed the suspended stillness. The children's shadows darting over the far-away balustrade in an elfin and hobgoblin-like game of mist-shrouded hide-and-seek were all that moved in the gathering dusk. Rémy's voice and the giggling and sudden screams of the Italian children lent the scene a strange and uncanny remoteness, and it was made even more unreal by a very early orange-coloured moon which just began to rise above the woods of Vargelonnès.

'At any rate,' said Godefroy, 'he's never mentioned it again, has he?'
'Not since the night of your return.'

Now some one was coming up the Bourgade, a man carrying a large earthenware jug. He walked up to the fountain, filled his vessel, and then, hesitating for a moment, came across the square and towards them. Godefroy recognized Antonio.

'Good evening,' said the Italian with a bow. 'I'm not intruding?'

'Not at all. How goes with you, Antonio?'

'Oh, me.' He smiled modestly. 'It goes always the same. Many children, much work. Much worry and argument, plenty of happiness, eh?'

He laughed softly and shifted the heavy jug from his right hand to his left.

'And with you it goes well, Madame Janine and Monsieur Soldat? Ah yes, I can see it goes well. Little troubles are soon forgotten with the help of the good God.' His smile grew slightly more serious, and he paused, obviously to ponder how best to put something that seemed to weigh on his mind.

'Monsieur Godefroy,' he said at length and with obvious anxiety to choose carefully every word, 'Monsieur Godefroy, I wish to apologize for the stupidity of my children. I have already spoken to Madame, but it urges me to tell you, too, that I feel very much ashamed of their stupidity.'

'Don't worry,' answered the soldier. 'It's long forgotten.'

'Ah,' said Antonio doubtfully, 'perhaps it is, and perhaps it isn't. Things like that, they aren't good for the friendship among people. It was a bad thing to do, and it was wicked of my children to do it when they knew you were away, Monsieur Soldat, and cause so much grief to Madame Janine.'

'Never mind, Antonio,' Janine interrupted gently. 'It wasn't their fault.'

Antonio nodded gratefully.

'Thank you for saying so, madame. A father is always grieved by the misdeeds of his children, no matter who or what makes them do them. And he always feels responsible, in his heart, for their wickedness.'

'Perhaps.' Janine sighed lightly. 'Don't think too much about it, Antonio.'

Her hand, resting on Godefroy's knees, had been tugging absent-

mindedly at the creases of his pulled-up trouser leg, now smoothing them, now crumpling them again. Now she withdrew it, rose from the stone step, and with a quiet nod at the visitor went into the house, where Godefroy heard her busying herself at the fireplace.

'Ah, truly,' said Antonio after a while, 'Madame Janine, she is very wise. It isn't good to think too much of the past, of the future. Better to think of the present. I say it often to my brother Napoleone. But he—he gives me plenty of worry. Of course he says it is I who give him worry, but——' He stopped and seemed to realize only now that Godefroy was alone. 'Madame Janine is not offended, I hope?'

'No, no. She's gone in to look after the soup.'

'Good,' answered Antonio. He looked about him and then put down his jug. 'Monsieur Godefroy, I must speak to you.'

'Sit down,' said the soldier, indicating the empty space beside him on the doorstep. 'What's troubling you?'

Antonio drew up his knees and propped up his right elbow. His bony, long-fingered hand, spread out against the darkening sky, was ready to illustrate whatever he had to say.

'Monsieur Godefroy,' he murmured, 'I must speak to you about my brother Napoleone.'

'What's he up to now?'

'That is the question. I don't know. He has a complicated mind, my brother Napoleone, and he isn't easy to understand. Two days ago, Monsieur Godefroy, when we were down in the fields together, working, he spoke to two men.'

'Who were they?'

Antonio shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. We were working at some distance from each other, he down at the river bank, I farther up in the field, and, looking up from my work, I saw him standing there talking to these men. I hadn't seen them come, and they didn't look like anyone one knows hereabouts. Now he had my whetstone in his pocket and I needed it, so I called down to him, but he took no notice, and when I called again and then started walking down towards him to fetch it the two men hastily touched their hats and walked off, and it seemed to me my brother Napoleone didn't want me to meet them and was annoyed that I should have seen him talking to them. Now perhaps there is no meaning in this and perhaps there is.'

'And what happened then?' asked Godefroy.

'Then nothing,' answered the Italian. 'Except that since then my brother Napoleone's been talking again about your—your—how does one say?—your flying thing——'

'Aeroplane?'

'Yes, your aeroplane. This aeroplane, Monsieur Godefroy, worries my brother Napoleone a great deal. At the time he made a great disturbance about it at the inn, and many people in the city don't like him very much since that disturbance, particularly Monsieur Archambault. Myself, of course, I don't know whether this aeroplane exists or not, and it matters little to me. But it matters fearfully much to my brother Napoleone.'

'Why should it?' demanded Godefroy.

But Antonio again shrugged his hunched-up shoulders and with his long-fingered hand described a rather enigmatic figure in the air.

'It worries him. He says he saw it fall into the wood at the time, and he wants to go and find it and have a look at it.'

'Does he?' asked Godefroy as calmly as he could. 'For what?'

'Ah!' answered the Italian. 'If one knew. But he doesn't say. He has a complicated mind, Monsieur Godefroy, and often he's hard to understand, especially when he worries away at something. Then he easily gets very angry, and one understands him even less well. Sometimes I'm sorry for my brother Napoleone. I feel brotherly pity for him. Because he worries so much and is angry so often he doesn't enjoy his life at all. He's a clever man and he should enjoy his life, much more than I who am not a very clever man. Life is so beautiful, Monsieur Godefroy, isn't it?—with one's wife and children, and in this very beautiful city with every one kind and friendly—but my brother Napoleone, he will be unhappy; he isn't happy as long as he isn't unhappy, and when he is unhappy he is very unhappy indeed. And very quarrelsome, *dio mio!*'

Antonio rambled along, now with both his hands describing with poignant gestures the profundity of his brother's mental complications. He did not notice at all that Godefroy, beside him, had become very impatient.

'So,' he continued, 'for instance, in the question of children. He has no children of his own, and because he sees that heaven has

blessed me with a great many of them—I don't say too many, because one must never quarrel over the gifts of God, must one, Monsieur Godefroy?—but very many indeed, so he makes my poor children do wicked and shameful things, as he did the other day with the little boy of Madame Janine's, to get me into trouble with my neighbours, because this, I regret to say, gives him pleasure. He's a very complicated man, my brother Napoleone, isn't he, Monsieur Godefroy?

'Very,' answered the soldier impatiently. 'And what does he mean to do about the aeroplane?'

Antonio sighed.

'I don't know. He wants to go and find it. But as he isn't quite sure of the spot, he wants me to go with him. He says I've seen it fall, too, and I must remember the spot, but I haven't because I didn't look, but he doesn't believe me and insists that I must come with him. He's also a very suspicious man, my brother Napoleone.'

He straightened himself up and looked at the soldier.

'But, Monsieur Godefroy,' he said earnestly, 'even if I knew where it is I wouldn't go with him without telling you so. Because I think again he only wants to get me into trouble with my neighbours. He doesn't speak kindly of you, Monsieur Godefroy, and perhaps he wants to do something wicked. He is a very shrewd man, my brother Napoleone.'

'Very,' answered the soldier. 'What has he got against me?'

'Nothing, Monsieur Godefroy, nothing reasonable. But he knows you are a friend of Monsieur Archambault's, and he's angry with Monsieur Archambault because he hit Monsieur Archambault on the nose when there was this quarrel at the inn about your aeroplane, and my brother Napoleone put himself in the wrong and made many enemies, and that's how it is. Very complicated. Now I must go.'

But he made no preparations to get up. It was clear that something else was on his mind. It had grown almost completely dark, and the soldier could no longer see his face.

'He says,' the Italian at last concluded, 'my brother Napoleone says there's something strange about you, and he's going to find out what it is. That's why he wants to look at the aeroplane. And the two men in the field, I think he spoke to them about it. I don't know, but I think he did.'

'And I think so too,' murmured the soldier.

But Antonio did not seem to have heard the remark. At any rate, he took no notice of it. Janine had stepped from the house and, standing behind the men, was calling the boy.

'Yes,' said Antonio and got up, 'the children. Ho, Dino, Francesco, Angela!' he called. 'Beppo, Luigi, Elena, Maria, Teresa!'

'Rémy!' Janine called. 'The soup!'

The children came scuttling across the square. Antonio picked up his jug.

'Buona notte,' he said. 'Good night, Madame Janine.'

'Good night, Antonio.'

He walked off, surrounded by the dancing, laughing, and screaming crowd of his offspring, and was soon lost in the darkness down the Bourgade. There was no one left in the square now except two men sitting under the lamp in front of Madame Rose's. Godefroy looked at them and thought they were Rousset Barthélemy and Fortescue.

'Godefroy!' Janine called from inside. 'The soup.'

'I'm coming,' he answered.

But he made no move. He was deep in his thoughts. The aeroplane, he thought, the past, all the things buried, how could I ever forget them? Forget them so utterly and completely? How could I ever assume that I would be safe in this place? Safe from the curiosity of men and forgotten by those whose wrongs I have given up trying to right? Not even here? Not even in this fortress high up in the skies? Not even here?

'Godefroy!' Janine called again. 'Aren't you coming?'

'I'm coming,' he answered.

He rose and straightened himself. A wave of sadness and bitterness surged up from his heart. He could almost feel its taste on his tongue, and it was no use trying to swallow it. He gazed across the peaceful square and at the two men sitting peacefully under the lamp behind their glasses, talking quietly. Why can't I sit like them? he thought. Why can't I? Ah, but they're not going to do it, not again, not this time. Whoever they are, they're not going to hunt me out of here, nor her, nor any of us. Not again. Not this time.

'Godefroy!' Janine called.

'I'm here, *grappa*,' he answered, and turned and walked into his house.

That night, after the soup, he went to see La Mère.

La Mère was not alone in her kitchen when he knocked and entered. Renée was helping her wash the dishes from supper, and Joannon was sitting on the bench in the corner, smoking his pipe.

'Oh, soldier,' La Mère greeted him without interrupting her work. 'Come to see us?'

Godefroy nodded. As always in her presence, he felt slightly embarrassed and at the same time relieved. The motherly intimacy that emanated in a curiously gruff and casual way from the disorderly vastness of her towering figure warmed and humbled him. He never quite felt like a grown-up man in the presence of La Mère Barthélemy, and he was all the more devoted to her for making him feel small and boyishly inexperienced. It was the same, he thought, with his friend Joannon, only much more so.

'Yes, madame,' he said. 'Unless I'm intruding.'

La Mère wiped her hands on her apron and turned towards him as he remained standing near the door. She gave him a broad, welcoming smile.

'Anything wrong?' she inquired.

'No. Just that I should like to speak to you.'

Joannon, who had given his comrade, as he entered, a smiling wink from his half-closed, whimsical eyes, now rose and pushed along the bench. Renée, always shy of others if the shantyman was in the room, busied herself with the fire.

'Leave it, Rée,' said her mother. 'We've finished.'

'Don't go,' said Godefroy. 'I've got no secrets.'

The woodsman winked at him, and this wink, with a sudden pang of happiness, reminded Godefroy of the days, almost forgotten now—or not so forgotten?—he had spent with his comrade on the roads. Theirs had been a curious, exciting blissfulness, and for a moment he thought: It would be good to go out with Joannon once more, for a day or two, just like that.

'We'll be back,' said the woodsman, and left the kitchen with the girl.

After they had gone La Mère sat down on a low seat beside the fire, a square sturdy stool with a straw-plaited top, such as one would find in almost every kitchen at Roquefort, and folded her hands in her lap. Godefroy, who stood facing her and leaning against the ledge of the fireplace, saw that she was tired, very tired. But her mind was alert and wide awake. It took an untiring interest in the happiness and sorrows of those around her.

'I want to ask you something, madame,' Godefroy said. 'It concerns Janine. When you've heard what it is you will understand that it is better for me to speak to you about it than to her.'

'Speak,' answered La Mère.

She liked the soldier Godefroy. She was fond of his dark earnest face, of the intent and serious look of his eyes, and the boyish smile that played round his experienced lips. The fullness of life spoke from his face, life that does not just touch lightly with a fleeting kiss the cheeks and brow of man and passes, but that leaves its deeply engraved traces, the marks of roads and paths along which an erring heart has wandered, of decisions made and carried out, of moods captured and conquered and hearts won and lost again—and is loved all the more for it. She was fond of him for that and liked to think that he knew it.

'It is this,' he said, and the furrows of a slight frown appeared on his forehead. 'When Janine first came to Roquefort she was on her way to somewhere, wasn't she?'

'She was, my boy,' replied La Mère. 'On her way to a place called Peira-Colonna. She asked me where it was and how far. After that she changed her mind and stayed. She never spoke about Peira-Colonna again.'

Godefroy nodded.

'Did she say to whom she was going at this place?'

'Yes, soldier. A man called La Noir, Monsieur Jean le Noir. I think he's a farmer up there, or cattle breeder. He owns a great estate. Ask Joannon.'

'And did she say she knew him or knew who he was?'

La Mère shook her head.

'No, she didn't. I remember the evening when she first arrived as if it were to-night. I remember asking her whether she knew this man

and that she said she didn't. I remember her saying, with a very sad and exhausted voice, that she never wanted to go there, but now she had come so far and knew no other place. I remember all that as if it had happened to-night. She was very unhappy then, your Janine, very exhausted and very unhappy.'

She paused and looked at the man standing before her.

'Is that all you want to know, soldier?'

He did not reply at once. Leaning against the ledge of the hearth, he was staring into the soft red glow of the fire and seemed to be dreaming. Then suddenly he raised his head and looked at the woman.

'How did she get to know about him?' he murmured as if to himself. 'Who made her go to Peira-Colonna? And why? Since she said herself she didn't want to go.'

He did not seem to expect an answer and looked surprised when La Mère slowly and with great effort rose from her seat and placed her heavy, careworn hand on his shoulder.

'Why?' he heard her say. 'My boy, because your Janine was at the end of her tether. Anyone could see it that night. She was homeless and very near despair. She had nowhere else to go, and she would have gone into service with Old Nick if it had meant a roof over her head and a palliasse for her boy to sleep on. You didn't see her that night when she arrived. I did. I shall not easily forget it. She was as lovely as God's own creature can be. And as brokenhearted. I don't know what happened to her on her way, in all those years she had spent wandering around from one place of service to the next, and she never spoke to me about them. But I know that she looked like all God's loveliness driven and hunted from the Garden of Eden, and her misfortunes had made her very beautiful.'

She paused and gently withdrew her hand from his shoulder.

'Yes, my boy. Her sufferings had made her very beautiful. Just as her beauty had made her suffer. There are such women in the world, not many, only a few. But when you meet one and she crosses your path and looks you in the eye you realize with a shudder what a great and fearful thing it can be—to be a woman.'

The sudden tenseness that had crept over her face as she spoke relaxed with a little sigh and a helpless flutter of her large and clumsy hands.

'For the rest,' she went on casually, 'some one at St. Saturnin des Vignes, a peasant or cowman or somebody, had told her of that place up in Vargelottes and that he knew for certain they needed people there and would take her on. She believed him and he showed her on the way. I think that's how it was.'

'Yes,' answered Godefroy. 'That's how it must have been.'

He turned away from the fire. His hands in his trouser pockets, he gazed absent-mindedly at the tiled floor.

'Since you're here,' said La Mère into the silence, 'there's something I've been wanting to ask you. When you were on the road with Joannon did you pass through a place with a pond and some tall poplars?'

'Yes,' he answered, looking up in surprise. 'Did Joannon tell you?'

She ignored the question. 'And how many of the poplars,' she asked, 'had been felled by the storm and lay with their faces drowned in the water? One?'

'No,' he answered. 'Three, of course. Didn't Joannon tell you? I remember them well, all three of them. They were a sad sight. What makes you ask?'

She smiled at him in gentle, knowing mockery.

'What made you ask me about Janine, my boy? A stupid little dream I had the other night. Nothing to do with Joannon. I just wanted to be quite sure it was stupid. There, now, you must go. They'll be waiting for you.'

She opened the door for him and looked out into the nightly square. The light above Madame Rose's door was swinging gently to and fro in the breeze, and a small crowd of men had gathered round the tables. The sound of Fabri's mouth organ came from the corner, sweet and peaceful and serene as ever.

'Good night, Madame Barthélemy,' Godefroy said. 'And thank you, eh?'

She looked at him earnestly.

'And you know now what to do, soldier?' her dark voice asked.

'Yes. I think I do. Good night.'

He did not go home but walked across to Madame Rose's. Archambault, Nicholas, Jaubert, and Modeste were sitting round a

table under the lamp, playing belotte. Fabri had nested in the corner, his back leaning against the house wall, his feet, in their tattered *espadrilles*, drawn up on the bench. He was softly playing to himself without paying much attention to the others. Joannon, his bare forearms crossed on his chest, stood behind Archambault's chair and was watching the game over his shoulder.

'Seeing you play, Nicholas,' grunted Archambault, 'one would think they'd never heard of belotte down at Terrerouge.'

The baker looked up, worried and disappointed.

'I'm taking great pains,' he muttered. 'I've lost the habit, though.'

'It shows,' grumbled Archambault.

'Ah, leave him in peace,' said Jaubert and Modeste with one voice. 'He's all right.'

Godefroy tapped Joannon on the shoulder, and he turned round.

'I want to talk to you.'

Joannon nodded and left the group. They walked over to the balustrade and sat down on the stone railing beneath the tall withered agave. A strong smell of strawberries and pine needles hung in the air, and Joannon sniffed at it.

'Listen,' said Godefroy. 'They're about.'

'Le Noir's men?'

'I think so.'

The woodsman dangled his legs from the balustrade and pursed his lips. Then he whistled quietly through his teeth, without saying anything. He cast a glance across to the group of men under the lamp and, considering that they were still within earshot, slipped down from the stone fence, tugging the soldier by his shirt sleeve.

'Let's walk for a moment.'

They strolled across the square to the other side and then slowly, without noticing much where they were going, down the Bourgade.

'Well?' asked the woodsman.

'Napoleone, the Italian, somehow is in with them,' answered Godefroy. 'They must know by now that Janine is here. At any rate, they will have a suspicion. Napoleone has a grudge against me, and he'll tell them all they want to know out of sheer spite.'

Joannon nodded but said nothing. He had resumed whistling softly through his teeth as they wandered along down the steep street.

'I've been talking to La Mère,' Godefroy continued, 'to get it clear in my mind. Now I understand it all. The men of Le Noir have driven her all the way up here, all the way from Terrerouge and beyond from one place after another. They meant to drive her all the way to Peira-Colonna, but——'

'But they lost her trace at Roquefort,' interrupted Joannon. 'I figured it that way all along. They didn't know this place was again inhabited. That's why I didn't want you to talk to them at Terrerouge. There was no need for them to know where we came from. But I've often since wondered whether Mocadeu kept his mouth shut. I told him to, but he's such a talker. He forgets.'

He paused, and as they walked along their steps began to echo more loudly from the cobblestones. The Bourgade, at this time of night, was like a deep and narrow mountain valley, and every sound came back several-fold from the dumb, dead walls of its many uninhabited houses. Here and there a light shone up in a window, and they passed an open door with light inside, but it was not often. From down below they could now hear the soft, even murmur of the Varouse as it played round the poles of the bridge and tumbled off gurgling amid the boulders and pebbles. The river had become very peaceful again; its waters stood low.

Joannon pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, stopped and blew his nose. Then he put it back and walked on.

'My guess is,' he said, 'if the two fellows Antonio has seen talking to his brother are the ones we mean or of the same crowd, they'll sooner or later turn up here to see for themselves. Until then it's better to say nothing to anybody. Because if they come they'll get bloody noses, and there's no need to talk about that sort of thing before it happens. Perhaps, though, we ought to tell the patron.'

They had reached the river and stopped at the bridge. They leaned their elbows on the railing and looked down into the leisurely flowing water.

'The patron,' said Joannon into the murmuring of the river, 'he says at the time of his grandfather this river was flowing the other way round the rock. He's quite certain about it; he remembers his grandfather explaining it to him that way. When he came here and found it all wrong he was mightily puzzled.'

He spat into the water and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

'I wonder what made the river do a thing like that. It's queer, isn't it? At that time there was no need for a bridge, of course. And there wasn't one when I came here. We built it ourselves.'

He sighed happily.

'Those were the early days, soldier,' he said. 'They aren't so long ago, but it seems a lifetime. 'Where were you then? Far away?'

'Me?'

Godefroy had been thinking of it the whole time while Joannon had talked away to himself and the river. To-night, since his talk with Antonio, the images of his earlier life, his unreal life, as he used to call it now to himself, had surged back upon his mind with a vengeance. They were like the great waves of an ocean during the rising tide. Safe and dry ashore, he had watched them come on towards him in a mighty roll, break into surf, and crumble away beneath his feet, retreating again. One after another they had come and retreated again, and while his unattentive eye had believed them to be steadily, surely receding and ebbing away they had imperceptibly reversed their course; they were now rising towards him; their surf was breaking over his feet; they were washing his ankles, storming with gathering force against his knees, and were rising still. And there was no retreat for him. He was compelled to stand there, in mortal danger of being carried away and drowned in their surging omnipresence, surrounded, forced to watch and wait and hope they would turn again at the last moment, before the onrush of their numbers could finally swallow him.

'Me?' he said. 'Far away, Joannon. A lifetime away, truly.'

Ah—surely, the years lived were hostile years; they were the enemy of the present. And it did not help much to know that the enemy was in front, assaulting you, instead of in your back, trying to stab you. But it was a new and fearful sensation to look one's past in the eye and not one's future. To feel that every step forward was, in an irretractable, fateful way, a step into the past already lived, and that the years yet to come were behind him, hidden from view and anticipation—it was a shuddering, revolting sensation, and yet one that quietly, poisonously attracted his mind. To go back to where he had

come from without really having been where he was—the idea confused him beyond words as he stood there gazing into the flowing water, and the confusion angered him. He shook himself free of the multitude of pestering, bothering images, and yet the next moment they were here again, this time not threatening, but sweet and persuasive. The thunder of the battlefield, the roar of his engine, the clatter of his machine-gun covering the river crossing had faded into the quiet, sun-drenched glory of a peaceful vineyard, into the stillness of a summer night spent in a lonely barn with a comrade or two, with the nightingale singing outside and the bullfrogs croaking in the near-by ditch; the hunger and gnawing restlessness of years spent in big towns, fighting for meals, for a coat and a pair of boots, for books, candles, and a kiss, they had faded into the serenity of an autumn afternoon in the park, idled away on a bench under the falling leaves of the great elm trees and watching the children sail their little boats in the basin of the fountain; and the anguish, the terror, and revolting meanness of a musty, stench-pervaded childhood spent among narrow-chested people who lived in narrow-chested houses, had they not now taken on the aureole of light-footed bliss, timeless children's laughter, of blessed sun and blessed rain and wondrous rainbow bridge across the sky? Had he not always been happy, immensely, immeasurably happy, as he strode forth, through year after year of great adventurous life?

Poison of the past that spoke with a cleft tongue—was it still coming on, rolling up towards him, wave after wave, breaker after breaker, rising and still rising? No—now it was receding again. His feet were dry; they stood on solid ground. He sighed and laughed and cocked his tongue at the retreating flood.

'Why,' asked Joannon into the murmur of the river, 'why don't you get married, Janine and you?'

'How can we?' he answered. 'Since I do not exist.'

Joannon laughed.

'But I really do not exist,' repeated the soldier. 'Of course I exist in the flesh as I stand here beside you. But I do not exist on paper. My name is on no document.' He paused and shook his head. 'It sounds absurd, but it is so. I'm not supposed to be here at all.'

'How's that?'

'I'm not supposed to stand here on this bridge talking to you. I'm not supposed to till this field down there, to cut the wood up there in the forest. I'm not supposed to walk up the Bourgade, not supposed to eat the soup at my table and——'

'But you are here. That's all that counts.'

Godefroy smiled.

'This is a pleasant conversation,' he said. 'In truth, the fact that I'm here is the only thing that doesn't count. It's no fact at all. I keep forgetting it myself. But it is so. I'm not supposed to be here.'

'Where, then, are you supposed to be?'

'Nowhere, Joannon. Except perhaps in the—past.'

'That's where we all are,' answered the woodsman, unperturbed. 'What's the difference between the past and the present, anyway? They look pretty much alike to me. If that's all that bothers you, there's no need to make a philosophy about it.'

He raised himself and turned away from the railing.

'There,' he said, 'I told you once before; don't start me talking or you'll hear a lot of nonsense. Let's turn in.'

They walked slowly up the steep street, and when they reached the square they found it deserted. The players of belotte had gone home; only Archambault was still sitting under the swaying lamp in front of Madame Rose's, an empty glass before him, Archambault who never found his way to bed, musing, dreaming, conversing half aloud, with himself.

'Oh, Archambault,' said Godefroy, 'you wouldn't care to come with me up into the woods one of these days, would you?'

The blacksmith raised his face.

'Why not, soldier? What do you want to do?'

'Look at something. That old aeroplane of mine. And perhaps take it to pieces.'

'Take it to pieces?' Archambault nodded but then became doubtful. 'No,' he said. 'No, soldier. Why don't you go with the bloody Italian? He's so interested in your aeroplane he hits innocent craftsmen on their noses. Take him.'

Godefroy smiled.

'He wouldn't do, Archambault. Besides, it's serious. I want to get there before he does. You understand.'

Archambault understood.

'We're going,' he said. He raised his empty glass. 'Salute, soldier. We'll take her to pieces all right.'

As he approached his house the door was opened and La Mère stepped out.

'Thank God you're here,' she said. 'Where the dickens have you been? We've searched the whole place for you.'

Godefroy did not understand. The old woman appeared to be angry, but her anger didn't seem quite genuine. Underneath, he felt, there was a joke. Still, as always in her presence, he felt small and humbly guilty.

'Down by the bridge,' he muttered. 'With Joannon. Talking.'

Suddenly it occurred to him that something might be wrong.

'What's the matter?' he inquired anxiously. 'Anything happened? To Janine?'

La Mère nodded gravely. But a second later there was the most quizzical of expressions on her wise old face.

'A great deal has happened, young man,' she answered reprovingly. 'Your wife's been very sick these past two hours. I've put her to bed, and she's got over it. Now she's all right. Go inside and see her. She's going to have a baby.'

'A baby? When?'

'Eventually, my boy. In good time.'

The soldier looked at her, stared at her massive shadow on his doorstep, opened his lips to say something, and then rushed, wordless, into his house.

La Mère Barthélemy closed the door behind him and stepped down into the square. The night was moonless, but the velvety summer sky, sprayed with myriads of tiny stars, seemed to shine from within in a great black luminosity.

'Ho, Archambault!' La Mère called across the square. 'Is that you? Go to bed.'

The blacksmith, as if in a dream, rose obediently and on heavy feet shuffled off down the Bourgade.

The clock of the church of Roquefort struck midnight. Its chimes sounded a long time across the valleys and the hundred hills, and

their echo came back, dark and sombre and unfailing, from the mountains of Vargelonnes.

12

'BLESSED BE THE seasons of Roquefort !' said Rousset Barthélemy.

'Blessed this summer of glory !'

He was alone, standing once again, as he did in moments of great silent happiness, on the ivy-covered ruins of his grandfather's house and gazing from the high ramparts of his city over the vast expanse of the land. In these moments he would speak to himself and use great words full of meaning such as occurred in his immense, borderless dreams. No one was near at this hour ; no one would hear his chant of praise but his forefathers on whose ground he stood, whose giant faces he recognized in the tattered shapes of the great white clouds that sailed in sun-blessed serenity across the pale blue summer sky. Ah, blessed be the summer of glory, he chanted ; let me grow a hundred blessed summers old !

Leaning his back against the ruined wall, his hand shielding his eyes against the flaming whiteness of the sun, he contemplated his land. It was rich, and it was giving generously, amply, wastefully. The Varouse, darting away from the flank of the rock, travelled broad and silvery across miles of pasture no longer idle, but populated from end to end with man's friendly beasts. Beyond stood the grey, dusty clusters of the olive groves among the high grass of the hills, heavy with their smooth, hard, grey-green fruit. And the terraces of the vineyards, the orchards and gardens, the bushes and shrubs, they were heavy with fruit ; marrow and water-melon, *aubergine*, cucumber, and artichoke were resting their bodies, panting from incessant growth, on the hot ochre-coloured earth and still continued to grow. The trees sighed under their loads of peaches and apricots, green apples and blue, metallic plums, and beneath their foliage the shade was black and cool.

Blessed the Land of the Hundred Hills ! The corn was nearly ripe.

A yellow, lemon-coloured sea, rippling gently under the breeze that came up from the far-away shores, was lapping the ancient rock. The sea of corn had swallowed everything; the roads and paths, the stone fences between the fields, the streams and rivulets, they had all been engulfed in the hot and dry vastness of this silent, voiceless ocean.

Ah, my fathers, chanted Rousset Barthélemy, you have done well to recall us into our land beneath the great mountains. See our children grow up with laughter on their lips in the orchards and vineyards. Let me grow a hundred blessed summers old!

'Ho!' he called out. 'The villages and hamlets! Madone! Ollioure! Chadourne! Ho!'

High up, from the broken ramparts of the old fortress, his voice rang out across the land in a long, swelling flourish, and his eyes were full of a great happy laughter as it came rolling back to him with the hundred voices of the hot, burning summer wind.

Fabri, as he came up from the lower fields with Ulysse in the afternoon, saw the priest sitting on the river bank below the rock, washing his feet. He quickened his own pace and that of the horse, and the priest, seeing him approach, waved to him.

He had pulled his trousers up to his knees, folded his dust-covered cassock in his lap, and lowered his white, hairy legs into the swift-flowing stream. Beside him, on a tuft of grass, lay strewn about his flat clergyman's hat, a sturdy walking-stick, and a red handkerchief tied into a bundle, together with his tattered shoes, an uncorked bottle of red wine, and a piece of bread. The quivering heat of the July afternoon was dancing about his bare head.

'Salute, my son!' he exclaimed. 'The Lord be with you. What is the name of this town up there in the sky, and who lives there?'

Fabri did not like being addressed as anybody's son. He had his own ideas about the Lord and whether He was with him or not, and he was easily perplexed by blunt questions from strangers. But, taking a good look at the man, he felt sorry for him.

For the priest was an ugly man. The Lord whose servant he had chosen to be had endowed him with the fierce, haggard snout of a starving boar which the merciless sun had turned to bright lobster red. He had given him a shaggy crop of bristly hair which stood up

from his forehead in a bewildering criss-cross fashion, and a pair of small, pin-pointed eyes that kept darting about incessantly with a hungry and suspicious expression, as if afraid they might miss something worth seeing or eating. Under a dust-encrusted black-and-silver stubble beard of several days' standing the servant of the Lord looked exhausted and discouraged, and dirty little streams of sweat were trickling down his brow.

'The city,' Fabri answered with gentle curiosity, 'calls itself Roquefort. Are you on your way there?'

'I may be,' answered the priest with a sly look. 'As you see me here, my son, I may be on my way almost anywhere.'

'You mean you've got nowhere to go?'

The priest nodded dejectedly. 'That is how it is. Nowhere to go.'

Fabri feared the man might begin to cry, and the prospect of his tears streaming down his sun-reddened bearded cheeks frightened him. But the priest merely removed his feet from the water and began to dry them in the folds of his cassock, a performance which Fabri watched with a mixture of interest, pity, and disgust.

'And no parish?' he asked.

'No—no parish,' answered the priest. 'I lost it. And that is the reason why I'm hungry for the company of kindly people. Hungry indeed. How easily does misfortune overcome even the servants of the Lord! Ah, my son, the story of my humble sufferings would fill many an evening spent over a modest glass of wine; it would indeed. And is there not an end to every valley of tears?'

The mere mention of tears made Fabri at once apprehensive again. But to his relief he saw that the servant of the Lord had no intention of weeping but was busy putting on his shoes.

'And perhaps,' the holy man sighed hopefully, 'this is where it is? Roquefort, you say, is the name of this proud city? Who owns it?'

'No one,' replied the Keeper of the Horses. 'The people.'

'The people,' nodded the priest appreciatively. 'Kindly people, I'm sure, who would not turn the servant of the Lord away from their gates, would they?'

He rose and straightened his tattered garments. Then he cast a long glance up to the ramparts of the towering city, his swift, pin-point eyes noting every detail, and finally looked at Fabri questioningly.

'And how does one call you?' asked Fabri.

'Father Pérégrin,' came the answer. 'Father Pérégrin Cogolin. It is a famous name. One of my ancestors'—he stopped and bent down to collect his belongings—'one of my ancestors was Théophile Cogolin, Bishop of Barcelonnette, and he ruled over all this land. But'—and now he looked earnestly at the man with the horse—'but he was captured by his great enemy, the mighty Bertrand de Tressaille, who threw him into prison, and he would have perished in the dungeon had not——'

He noticed that Fabri looked at him sharply and stopped abruptly.

'Shall we go?' he asked.

Fabri was not impressed by the easy-flowing verbiage of the holy man. He couldn't think why he wanted to tell him a long story about his ancestors, but he felt sorry for him and thought him, in a way, absurd and entertaining. It was clear that the servant of God had made up his mind to come with him, for better or for worse, and it didn't seem as if he could do anything about it. Besides, who was he, after all, a humble keeper of horses, to send an unfortunate divine into the wilderness?

'Come on,' he said. 'I'm late as it is.'

'The Lord will reward you,' answered the priest, donning his hat.

I wonder whether He will, thought Fabri. He had his doubts.

The sun was setting on the square. It was the hour of the great game of boules. Fabri was right; he was late; his tardy arrival had upset the traditional arrangement, and he found the assembled citizens in an impatient mood.

'Ho, Fabri,' old Gidéon shouted angrily. 'Hurry up with your horse and get past!'

'Get going!' Jaubert chimed in. 'Move your animal!'

'Wait a minute,' answered the Keeper of the Horses. 'I've got something to ask you.' He looked round, rubbing his neck with the back of his hand. 'Can we use a priest?'

'No!' growled old Gidéon. 'Move your horse!'

'A what?' asked Modeste. 'A priest? You mean a curé? Have you got one?'

'Yes,' Fabri confessed. 'This here Father Pérégrin. He's an errant and homeless servant of the Lord in search of an abode.'

All eyes turned towards the fountain, where Father Pérégrin, unnoticed, had settled down for a rest. He had smoothed his cassock and had assumed, as far as was possible in view of his neglected state, a dignified attitude.

The assembled citizens realized that they were confronted with a singular problem and that the beginning of the great game of boule would have to wait until it was, at least temporarily, dealt with. Could they use a priest? It was a wholly unexpected question which baffled one and all of them. Reluctantly they abandoned their beloved wooden balls and gathered round the fountain. Caporals were stuck in their appointed places and hands pushed into trouser pockets. Could they use a priest? Silence fell on the circle.

It then turned out that they were, at this moment, without a suitable spokesman. Neither Rousset Barthélemy nor Joannon nor Fortescue was about. Not even that inveterate player of boule, Archambault, was present. He had left early that morning together with the soldier Godefroy on some errand and had not yet returned. At last Jaubert decided to take matters in hand.

'Salute,' he addressed the priest.

'The Lord be with you,' answered the clergyman humbly.

This address so bewildered Jaubert that he found no more to say.

'Gaspard,' he told young Barthélemy. 'Go. Fetch your father.'

While they waited for the patron the citizens now took a cautious look at the newcomer. Never, they agreed silently, had they set eyes on so peculiar an individual, at once so repugnant and interesting to look at. Father Pérégrin had rightly assumed that the citizens of Roquefort were kindly folk. Like Fabri, they felt pity and sympathy for the miserable divine, no matter how ungainly his appearance, and old Gidéon alone seemed adamant in his refusal even to consider this interruption of his beloved game.

'Priest?' he muttered angrily. 'We want no priest. Let's get on with the game.'

But Modeste at once reproved him. 'Now, Gidéon, you don't own this place. None of us do. That's what the patron always says, and he's right.'

'Where did you find him, Fabri?' asked Valette.

'Down at the river,' the Keeper of the Horses replied hastily. 'I didn't ask him to come. He just came.'

With an embarrassed grin and a shrug of his shoulders he visibly declined all responsibility for the arrival of this controversial individual. The citizens, with a murmur, agreed. It was clear that, with or without Fabri, Father Pérégrin would in all probability have found his way up the Bourgade in any case.

'What does he want?' Modeste inquired. 'To be a priest in this city?'

'We want no priest!' interrupted Gidéon. 'Move your horse!'

'Why not?' asked Jaubert. 'If he finds himself a house and works for his food.'

'Once he's washed and shaved,' Nicholas, the baker, suggested.

'After all,' observed Napoléon Bonpère, 'why not have a curé?'

'Since you have a church,' added Father Pérégrin.

The servant of the Lord had intervened at the right moment. He had risen to his feet and, standing on the highest step of the fountain, dominated the small crowd. The sun was just sinking behind the mountains of Vargelonnes; a riot of liquid fire had inundated the sky. Floods of red and golden light poured over the roofs of the old city and seemed to clothe the figure of the errant churchman in almost terrifying glory.

Indeed, they had a church. In reminding them of it, the servant of the Lord had thrown the citizens into sudden and profound perturbation. It was difficult to decide what was more disturbing, the fact that all this time they had known it to be there and had never paid much attention to it, or that it should have been left to a stranger, a vagrant preacher, to make them aware of their impious negligence. Whichever it was, it was a great unpleasantness.

Father Pérégrin, casting a swift glance about him, noticed their ill-concealed embarrassment and continued at once in a humbly solemn voice which soon grew more and more challenging: 'You have a church, my friends, and you have no priest?' he asked. 'Indeed, you're even debating the question whether to have one or not, aren't you? How most extraordinary, my friends! Must one then assume that this house of the Lord, built with devout intent by the founders of this city, is being utterly neglected by their descendants? Must one assume

that in all these years it has never been entered? Does one not perceive'—and here the preacher's tone became distinctly reproachful—'that its porch is overgrown with grass and weeds, that its window is covered with cobwebs, that its roof has almost fallen in? And must one not thus conclude that none of you citizens, yea, not a single one among you, has felt the urge of at least unlocking its door?'

He paused and looked about him.

'Ah, shut up!' growled old Gidéon in the silence. 'Mind your own business. Move your horse, Fabri!'

'Let him talk,' said a deep, peaceful voice.

It was Rousset Barthélemy who had entered the circle. The citizens felt relieved. For it was true what the preacher had said, shockingly true, and they did not deny it. Yet after a moment's consideration they did not really feel guilty. In their hearts they would not admit having done anything which might seriously offend the Lord. They felt they should not have been accused of downright godlessness because their minds and hearts had been in their fields and vineyards, on their pastures with their children and animals. Had they aroused the wrath of the Creator, would, then, their orchards burst with fruit, their corn stand high in the fields, their vines bend under the weight of their swelling grapes? Would they have eaten their soup in peace evening after evening, slept with their wives in happiness night after night, and wakened with serene hearts to the laughter of their children morning after morning? If the Lord had really resented the weeds on the porch, the cobwebs on the window, the dilapidated roof, would He not have reminded them with some evil and harassing dreams? But the Lord had done nothing of the kind. Their dreams had been happy and unhaunted, and therefore, they concluded, their hearts had not really sinned.

Father Pérégrin quickly sensed their train of thought. He was no fool, and the last thing he intended to do was to arouse an antagonism which might deprive him of the one thing he was, at least for the moment, anxious to obtain: their good will, a roof over his head, and a plate of soup.

'Quite, my friends,' he said gently. 'I know your answer and I appreciate it. You may be right; probably you are, and far be it from me to pronounce you wrong.'

The citizens nodded, including Rousset Barthélemy. This was precisely how they felt.

'But,' proceeded Father Pérégrin, 'there come moments in the life of every one, my friends, when it is as well to have a servant of the Lord at hand. The moment, for instance, when——'

He stopped. Rousset Barthélemy had pushed his wide hat back from his forehead and with a brief, flapping gesture of his right hand indicated that it was unnecessary to pursue the argument any further.

'That goes,' he said genially. 'We understand you. Who's going to christen our children, to marry our sons and daughters, and to say a little prayer over our graves when the hour comes? Wasn't that what you meant to say?' Father Pérégrin nodded. 'Well, if you ask me I say there's no harm in having a priest. No harm at all.'

He smiled broadly, and every one knew what he thought. The wedding of Renée and Joannon. The baby of the soldier and his Janine. And who knew——

'Prayers over my grave?' old Gidéon broke into the silence. He stared at Father Pérégrin. 'You're not going to say any prayers over *my* grave! Not over *my* grave, eh?'

'As you wish, my friend,' answered Father Pérégrin meekly.

'Now, Gidéon,' said Rousset mildly. He took his dead caporal from his upper lip, spat on the cobblestones between his feet, then moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and put the cigarette back. Amused and relieved that a great problem had no sooner appeared than it was already solved, they bade each other good night and withdrew into their houses, leaving Father Pérégrin to himself. It was bad enough that they had missed their game of boules altogether. For now was the hour of the soup.

The sun had sunk and disappeared. The square was almost dark, and Madame Rose came out to light the lamp above her door. When she perceived the lonely figure of the churchman sitting on the steps of the fountain she walked over to him. The furious rouser of consciences looked his old sly and miserable self again. Shrouded in the swiftly gathering folds of night sat a tattered, unshaven, and hungry-looking man who gazed in front of him from small, attentive eyes, satisfied and obviously in agreement with himself.

'Come over to the house,' said Madame Rose, 'for the soup.'

She thought she might as well have a good look at the man who was henceforth going to be her neighbour. For the inn called Au Sieur de Roquefort was, after all, next door to the church, with only a narrow dark alley between them.

Shortly afterwards Godefroy and Archambault came home. When they saw Rousset Barthélemy and Joannon sitting in front of Madame Rose's with their menthe and obviously waiting for them, they walked straight up to them. They were both tired to exhaustion, and Godefroy seemed ill-humoured. He had bandaged his left thumb with a strip of material torn off his shirt. With a sigh they let themselves drop on to the bench.

'Cut myself,' Godefroy explained, holding up his thumb. 'Piece of torn metal, sharp as a knife.'

'I'll get you a drink,' said Joannon. He went inside and returned with two filled glasses which he placed before the men.

'Salute,' Rousset said. He put down his glass. 'Well, did you find her?'

'Found her all right,' answered Archambault.

The wrecked plane had been in exactly the position Godefroy had remembered it in. It had sunk into the ground a little during the winter and was fairly grown over with grass and weeds. Taking her to pieces, Archambault explained, rusty and corroded as she was, cutting her up into bits and burying her, a bit here, a bit there, and covering it all up again, had been quite a job. But now she was well out of the way. Not in a hundred years would anyone find her.

'Unless some one's found her already,' said Godefroy sullenly. 'We should have done it months ago. We shouldn't have waited so long.'

'Well, what went wrong, soldier?' asked Joannon.

'Perhaps nothing. I don't know.'

A little thing, the identification plate, he explained, had been missing when they dismantled the wreck. It was a small, rectangular steel plate, the size of a palm, fixed among the controls and giving particulars about the origin, year and place of construction of the machine, and other details. The thing might, of course, have come loose and fallen off, but they thought it unlikely. They were pretty sure it had been unscrewed and removed. They had been looking for it all over the place but hadn't found it.

'Some one,' Godefroy said gloomily, 'has been tampering with her. Couldn't it have been the Italian?'

Joannon didn't think so. 'We kept a fairly close eye on him,' he said, 'since the night you spoke to me about him.'

'Well, I don't know,' concluded Godefroy doubtfully. 'Only what he means to do with the thing, I can't imagine. Assuming he has it.'

He looked at his friends, a worried smile on his sun-tanned, pensive face.

'Well,' he sighed, 'that's that. Nothing further to be done about it, I suppose.' He looked up and gazed across the square. 'There comes the King.'

'I must have another drink,' announced Archambault. 'You're having another too, soldier?'

But Godefroy shook his head. Fortescue, wearing a flaming red shirt with rolled-up sleeves and no coat, came across the square and up to the inn. In the pale greenish light of Madame Rose's lantern the gaunt old man looked older and more fantastic than ever before. His beard suited him well. Regarding him, Rousset found it difficult to remember what he had been like without it, so unalterably had it become part of his face. The summer was doing him good. His face and arms were deeply sunburned; his gestures, his voice had become large and expansive. He was in grand good humour.

'Salute, the company,' he greeted the assembly under the lamp with a broad smile. 'What is this about a curé having arrived? I suppose it is a joke?'

Archambault, at this moment, was returning from inside, carrying in each hand a glass of menthe.

'I brought you one anyway, soldier,' he said. 'By the way, there's a preacher inside, looking like a hungry wolf and also eating like one. Calls one "my son" and says he's going to preach in the church. Wants me to unlock the door for him. Can't say I like him.'

'Oh, he's all right,' said Rousset.

'So it's not a joke?' asked Fortescue. He sat down, obviously greatly amused. 'Let's hear all about it, patron. Who brought him?'

'Fabri picked him up by the river,' said Joannon.

'Just like him' grunted Archambault. 'Salute, soldier!'

He raised his glass and emptied it with one gulp.

'What is he worrying about?' asked Fortescue.

Joannon explained about the missing plate.

'The point is,' Godefroy interrupted him, 'anyone can see from this plate that the plane was a Spanish machine from the Civil War. Any police sergeant can see that, if he can read.'

'And do you think any police sergeant would be interested in that, assuming that he found it?' asked Fortescue. 'No, my boy. Not in this part of the world.' He laughed gently and patted Godefroy on the shoulder. 'You've got other and happier things than that to worry about. Thank God. Not true?'

'That's what I've been trying to tell him,' said Rousset. 'Don't you worry about a lot of rubbish, soldier. It's just as well you got the thing out of the way. But now forget about it. And don't get frightened.'

Godefroy raised his head and looked at Rousset earnestly.

'I'm not frightened, patron,' he answered. 'I've never been frightened in my life. The one thing I've never been.'

'Quite,' nodded Rousset. 'I didn't mean it that way. I meant, forget about it. Besides, should there ever be trouble, or any insane policeman get it into his mind to come all the way from Aubagne to poke his nose into this town, then don't forget there's us, too, and we're quite a handful of men.' He laughed broadly and comfortably. 'Besides, what have we got the curé for if not to keep the devil away from this place? Don't you worry.'

'Yes, about this curé,' Fortescue said. 'Now, tell me——'

Godefroy rose from the bench.

'I must turn in. Good night, the company. By the way, Joannon, that country up there is simply drowning in blackberries. And big as grapes they are, aren't they, Archambault? What about going up with the girls one day?'

Joannon understood his comrade. He, too, had often since thought of their journey across the hills.

'Let's go Sunday,' he said.

The hour of the soup was over. The square began to grow lively again. One by one the players of belotte arrived at Madame Rose's. From the alleyway behind the citadel the sound of Fabri's mouth organ was approaching. Godefroy went home.

‘That priest,’ Janine said that night, ‘Godefroy, I don’t like him. He’s a bad man.’

The citizens didn’t think Father Pérégrin a bad man.

Once he was washed and shaved and his ragged clothes mended, they found him, though still far from being handsome, at least bearable to look at. They considered among themselves that, deservedly or not, he must have gone through some hard and discouraging times, and their sympathy and help were therefore not wasted on him. As for his boarish exterior, he was surely not responsible for it, and it would have been unkind to hold it against him. They soon got used to it, and the children thought it funny.

The servant of the Lord, in his turn, acknowledged their various little kindnesses with modesty and humility. He realized that they had their own ideas about life and were extremely sensitive about being ordered about and preached to. Fond of sharp reasoning and clever argument—they were great reasoners and arguers themselves—they nevertheless disliked speeches. Father Pérégrin decided to make no more of them.

Nor did he tell them much of the circumstances which had brought him to his recent state of dejection, and this mainly because the citizens were visibly not interested. Few of them ever looked back on their own lives. Their present days were full, and they did not care who people were and whence they came. No one had asked them any questions, and they were not going to ask any of others. Father Pérégrin found this suited him.

Once he had settled down in an empty one-room house behind the citadel, he seemed, furthermore, in no particular hurry to open the church and begin his activities there. This again, in the eyes of the citizens, showed him to be a reasonable man. Instead he liked to sit in front of Madame Rose’s, with a glass of wine, reading his breviary, or talking to whoever happened to pass or cared to keep him company, or simply not doing anything at all but just sitting behind his glass, blinking against the sun, watching the women at the fountain, the children at play, taking a kindly, unobtrusive interest in the busy life of the old city. He was a peaceful man.

Still, there remained one or two among the citizens who did not care for his company.

Old Gidéon stubbornly refused to be reconciled and took no trouble whatever to conceal his dislike of the churchman. Whenever he saw the servant of the Lord from afar he studiously made a detour through odd alleys and passages to avoid meeting him, and whenever he was compelled to cross the preacher's path he took care to greet him with some stinging quip or remark, shot out so quickly that it baffled Father Pérégrin and invariably left him without an answer. Soon old Gidéon's obstinacy in insulting the servant of the Lord became a source of general interest and amusement. He never used the same remark twice, and his imagination seemed inexhaustible. It was thought that he spent the best part of his old and lonely nights thinking out these sharp-edged missiles, and that was probably what he did. He had no reason for his hostile behaviour. Rather, did it seem as if the absence of a reason was in itself the reason for his persistence. He just did not like the priest. For him that was reason enough.

Archambault, on the other hand, thought he had a reason. He was a restless and often ill-humoured old man, and being ordered about or spoken to in a condescending manner annoyed him beyond words. Father Pérégrin, the evening of his arrival, had made the mistake of addressing the blacksmith benevolently as 'my son' and had followed this by a request to do a job for him, namely to open the heavily barred and locked doors of the church. Archambault, inordinately proud of his profession, for which he demanded strict respect, resented this for three whole days. Still, at the end of the third day he would have been ready to make it up with the preacher and might even have set to work on the rusty church door if asked to do so in a civil manner, had he not made a most disconcerting discovery.

It was that he found the servant of the Lord in front of Madame Rose's, in the company of his one and only enemy, the Italian called Napoleone.

Archambault took a grave view of this.

It was the hour of dusk, between the game of boule and the reassembly of the citizens for their nightly belotte, and the square was deserted but for the figures of the two men beneath Madame Rose's swaying lamp. Coming from Rousset Barthélemy's, on his way down

the Bourgade, Archambault was crossing the square at its lower end and recognized them clearly behind their glasses filled with green menthe. He stopped and for a moment hid, out of sight, behind the corner of the Centurion's house.

The two men were not talking with their normal voices; they were whispering, he thought; perhaps they even had a secret. The confounded Italian drunkard, who, one autumn night almost a twelve-month ago, had hit him squarely on the nose with his fist for no reason whatever—for no reason whatever, Archambault repeated to himself—this despicable individual in friendly, even animated conversation with the wolfish divine—this was too much. It destroyed for ever all chances of his coming to terms with the holy man. Moreover, it made him, in a vague way, deeply suspicious. He was too far away to be able to overhear their conversation and, cursing himself, finally slipped out of his hide-out and angrily tramped home.

'Well?' asked Napoléon, bending over his glass. 'It goes?'

The priest shook his head.

'It doesn't,' he answered. 'It doesn't go at all. It is very difficult.'

'But you've seen her?'

'I've seen her,' grunted Father Pérégrin. 'I've tried to speak to her several times. I've called on her, with this little excuse and that, but no. She's a fire-spitting woman. She doesn't like me. But, ha! Is she beautiful!'

Napoléon nodded understandingly. Father Pérégrin stared fiercely into his glass and, with inflated nostrils, snorted: 'She is so beautiful she makes me angry. Ha, what a witch the Lord Creator has made! She smells so good she makes me feel almost sick. I look at her and I must cry. It is very difficult, my son, very difficult.'

'So you think she will not go?'

'No,' answered the priest with angry conviction. 'She will never go. Not of her own free will. It's because of the man.'

'Love,' nodded the Italian. 'Very much love.'

'Very much,' agreed Father Pérégrin. 'Too much. But she must go.' He raised his head from his glass and looked at his companion sideways and a trifle doubtfully. 'Well?'

But Napoléon shrugged his shoulders.

'If it weren't for the man,' went on Father Pérégrin, 'it would be easy. One would do something, and it would go. A woman without a man is any man's woman. You push her, a little this way, a little that way, and she goes. But with a man—no. Like a ship at anchor. What can one do with the man?'

'Nothing,' answered Napoléon.

'Nothing? I wonder. He's a stranger. How does he call himself?'

'Godefroy.'

'I've seen him. He's a great big fellow. Very strong?'

'Very,' nodded the Italian. 'He'll kill anyone who tries to touch her. And all the men are his friends.'

'All the men?'

'All of them,' said Napoléon.

The priest thought and said nothing. He put up his elbow and propped his ungainly face in his large hairy hands. Napoléon watched him. He was beginning to be slightly afraid of Father Pérégrin. He prided himself on being a clever man, and it worried him to think that Father Pérégrin might consider him stupid. Besides, he was a little apprehensive about possibly being seen and watched—or even overheard!—by some one with a suspicious mind. Cautiously he lifted his face from his glass and peered round. The square was empty. There was no one about. But people might appear any moment. Already there were steps along the Bourgade. He was anxious to get away.

'And the boy?' the preacher asked suddenly.

'A savage,' answered Napoléon.

'Good. I'll talk to him. We'll see.' He sighed and contemplated sorrowfully his empty glass. 'Ah, it's difficult, my son. It's very difficult. But——'

'I'm going,' whispered the Italian and slipped away.

Father Pérégrin took no notice. He picked up his breviary and, after turning a few pages, began to read. After a while the door of Janine's house was opened and the woman appeared on the doorstep. She called for the boy, once, twice, without receiving an answer. She called again, with her rich dark voice, and finally a small shadow appeared at the far end of the square and came shuffling along towards the house. As he reached the doorstep his mother, with a gentle

gesture of her hand, brushed his disorderly mop of hair and said something to him in a low, gentle tone. The boy gave an irritated jerk and whisked past her into the door. Father Pérégryn, looking over his breviary, watched her for a moment. Then he nodded to himself.

A little later the men gathered outside Madame Rose's for the evening's game. Father Pérégryn pushed into the corner, trying to make himself as unobtrusive as possible. But Rousset Barthélemy came straight up to speak to him.

'About my daughter's wedding, Monsieur le Curé,' he said.

'Your servant,' answered the priest with a smile.

'We want it to be next week. Everything is ready. What about the church?'

Father Pérégryn looked at the patron uneasily.

'If it is desired,' he said humbly. 'The house of the Lord will be ready, too, to receive the young couple. But the blacksmith——'

Rousset Barthélemy smiled.

'I'll talk to him,' he said.

Then he grew serious. His deep black eyes under their dark brows looked at the priest for a long time, and Father Pérégryn looked very uncomfortable.

'It is a mistake to make Archambault angry,' Rousset said at last. 'He's a good man. Very good, in his heart.'

He rose and without a further word joined the players. Godefroy, Fabri, Joannon had arrived, too, as well as Jaubert, Modeste, Valette, and half a dozen others, and in between cards they discussed the forthcoming marriage.

'It's going to be a festival,' declared Madame Rose.

She was standing behind Joannon and patted his shoulder.

'A great festival, my children. Leave it to me.'

13

THE WATERFALL SHOT over the jutting neck of rock in a cloud of silver spray. In the dark wooded gorge the tossing water seemed

suspended like a transparent curtain, reflecting at once all the lights of the summer afternoon, the dark green of the pine trees, the lighter green of the moss, the pale trembling blue of the sky, and the sun's heavy gold. Below, the water gathered in a large smooth basin of rock whose moss-covered bottom shone through, clear and seemingly unfathomable. Rippling waves travelled across its surface in green circles, growing wider and wider until they dissolved in the stillness of the pond. Farther down, across and between white boulders and the dark bodies of fallen trees, down the narrowing gorge, the river resumed its course.

From the steeply falling river bank the two companions gazed up at the foaming cascade and then down towards its cool, green stillness. Even here in the woods the heat was oppressive. Sweat was trickling down their sun-baked cheeks and necks and dripped in little beads from their foreheads over their eyes.

'Shall we?' asked Joannon.

'Yes,' answered Godefroy. 'Let's.'

Their wicker baskets stood beside them in the moss brimful with black, glistening berries, large as grapes. Their hands and arms and legs were scratched and pricked and stung in a hundred places by the incredible, pathless tangle of blackberry bushes, stinging nettles, broom, and bracken which stretched endlessly through the woods on either side of the river. They had worked their way through it for hours. Now their baskets were full. The day's work was done.

They dropped their few clothes, shirt, trousers, and *espadrilles*, and stepped to the edge of the river bank.

'Where are the girls?' asked the woodsman.

But for the noise of the tossing water there was utter stillness. At moments the uproar of the waterfall itself seemed soundless, so deafening it was. Now and then a wood pigeon started cooing high up among the firs but soon fell silent again in the breath-taking heat.

'Ho! The girls!' Joannon called.

They were farther down. Godefroy saw them move about among the shrubs. The blue scarf over her brown hair, that was Janine. The red scarf over her black hair, Renée. They were still picking.

'Enough!' he called. 'The baskets are full. Come up!'

The girls looked up and saw the men, their dark tanned bodies

bathed in sunlight, standing poised above the waterfall. For a moment there was silence, only the rushing of the water.

'Look !' exclaimed Renée. 'They're going to have a swim !'

Janine laughed. 'Wouldn't you? Come on !'

The young girl smiled unsurely, her cheeks suddenly flushed a deep crimson with the heat and desire of the humming summer hour. Janine, seeing her standing there among the green foliage, quickly took her face between her hands and pressed a warm kiss on her berry lips.

'There !' she laughed. 'We know each other, don't we?'

Then they came running up the slope towards the fall.

The men, meanwhile, had climbed down the pool. From a flat brown stone which stood out just above the surface Joannon dived flat, like an arrow, into the water, so swift, so sharp, that his plunge seemed hardly to disturb the stillness of the surface. His face under water, his arms flung forward, his cupped hands forming a sharp-edged bow, he shot motionless half-way across the pool. A stroke or two and he was under the cascade. Godefroy saw him stand up. The pool was not deep ; the water reached just above his waist. He raised his arms, opened his hands as if to catch in them the falling silver curtain. His excited laughter rang through the woods like the call of a bird. With a swift plunge Godefroy followed him.

When he turned round again and looked back, with veils of spray dancing before his eyes, he saw the two girls stepping forward cautiously among the bushes towards the edge of the water. They were about the same height, yet Renée, slim and of finer build, seemed taller and almost lanky beside Janine. The reflection of the water, now that for a second they stepped into the shade, cast a trembling tint of virginal green across the upper part of her body which seemed to grow straight from the fan-shaped foliage. One more summer day, thought Joannon, this one more summer day, and hers will be the sweetness of untrembling maturity.

'Ho !' he called. 'Here ! Over here !'

They were now standing together on the flat brown stone, naked and yet clothed, for the sun and the leaves of an oak tree cast a wild pattern of turbulent shades over their bodies. They laughed, holding each other's hands, and there was shyness and pride and wilful happiness in their laughter.

'Step in slowly,' advised Joannon.

'It isn't deep,' called Godefroy.

And they laughed back from wet, smiling eyes.

Ah, Godefroy thought, let me never forget this moment's blissful image. Make me remember it for ever and ever, until the end of my days. Slowly the green water rose above their ankles, rose to their calves and knees, as they came forward, holding hands. Janine first, Renée half a step behind. Janine's soft, full shoulders shone in a mellow golden hue, and not so much as a shiver ran through her body as the water rose around her and her palms touched the cool green surface, gently, surely, tenderly familiar. Beside her Renée, white-skinned and with the wide-open eyes of a cautious deer, seemed to hesitate; but a moment later, with a soft cry of fear and delight, she suddenly tore herself loose from her companion's hand, tossed back her head, and rushed forward into the showering spray.

'Now,' said Joannon after laughter and splashing had subsided, 'let us carry them, soldier.'

Renée, in her nineteenth year, was a light, weightless burden as the woodsman bore her back to the water's edge and up the steep bank. Janine, her left arm clinging round Godefroy's neck, was a richer charge, and he loved her for being heavy in his arms.

'You're carrying your daughter too,' she whispered, and kissed the wet groove of his collarbone.

'Are you sure, *grappa*?'

'Sure,' she answered. 'So sure, a daughter of love.'

The wood pigeons called and the water sang as they climbed back into the sun. On a light-flooded grass and moss-covered plot, surrounded by giant umbrella pines, just above the waterfall, they stretched out to dry in the hot sun. Godefroy, lying on his stomach, gazed across his folded arms into the sparkling greenness of the forest. Joannon, by his side and resting on his back, was looking up into the dome of trees. For a moment the girls sat about, unsure, glancing shyly, laughingly at each other while pearls of water, in swift little processions, still tumbled down between their breasts into their laps. Then Renée rose and, taking Janine by the hand, drew her away farther up and out of sight.

'If you weren't what you are,' said Godefroy into the stillness of the forest, 'what would you wish to be?'

'A tree,' answered Joannon without a stir. 'Why do you ask?'

'I'm wondering what the difference is between man and the rest of creation—a horse, a blackberry bush, an artichoke, a dragonfly.'

'There is none.'

'None?'

'Small differences, yes. A horse, it's an artichoke that's learned to walk. Ulysse, he's Fabri, only he doesn't know how to play the mouth organ. It's a small difference.'

'But when a blackberry bush dies it dies. Nothing is left.'

'What is left when man dies?' asked the woodsman.

He let his knees drop back and straightened his legs.

'If I die as I am lying here,' he went on, 'I shall just rot away and slowly become part of the earth again. Just like the wood pigeon that drops dead from the branch of the tree and whose body rots away in the moss. Creation goes on. That's all. Why should there be anything else?'

'Man,' answered the soldier, 'is supposed to have a soul. It lives on after death.'

'Does it?' asked the woodsman. 'I hope mine doesn't. It is a frightening thing to imagine, a soul hanging around somewhere without a body to hang on to. Why should it do that? For what purpose?'

He paused for a moment, looking up into the trees.

'When I look at my trees,' he went on after a while, 'I don't see why there should be a difference between them and myself. I should be quite content to die like a tree. Why should my soul survive and not the soul of the tree? It is an immodest thing to believe that the soul of Fabri is worth preserving after death and Ulysse's is not. Only because he knows how to play the mouth organ? Or that my soul should live on because I know how to saw off the feet of a tree, and the tree doesn't know how to saw off mine? I'm not saying it well, perhaps, soldier, but that is what I mean.'

'But suppose all souls, the souls of everything ever created, survive?' said Godefroy.

'Why should they survive? They need not have died, then.'

'Perhaps they die in order to make room on earth for more creation.'

And yet something of them is preserved, that little something that is everlasting, eternal. So nothing is lost. The spirit of the forefathers. The breath of time. Could it not be like that?

'It could,' answered Joannon. 'But it would depress me. There would be no space to breathe in.'

'It makes people less afraid of death, thinking their souls will live on.'

Joannon shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'I shouldn't like to die thinking that something of me is left behind. I should like to go whole as I've come. Why, if the souls of people who are dead are living with us, aren't also the souls of people not yet born living in our midst? The patron, for instance, he says he sometimes sees his grandfather. But he doesn't see his grandchildren. So you see—it's an idea made by man. Made by the fear of his heart. God has nothing to do with it. The heart of the tree is not afraid. It dies contentedly with its trunk and branches. As I should like to die. One day.'

The soldier nodded over his folded arms.

'You don't know how happy you are,' he said, 'being a tree.'

'Oh,' answered Joannon with a smile, 'I know.'

They spoke no more. The summer heat hummed and danced about them and made them drowsy. For a while they heard the girls talking softly to each other in their hide-out behind a large flowering bush, and then there was silence.

Lying beside each other, their knees half drawn up and just touching, Renée's head resting against Janine's cool, soft shoulder, the girls had sunk into slumber. The shadows of the dancing leaves clothed their bodies in sunlit garments of ever-changing fanciful patterns.

Joannon thought he heard the soldier beside him rise softly to his feet, but he was too sleepy to look. He thought he heard the faint crackling of pine needles under some one's naked feet, a whisper, the snapping of a twig. Then there was stillness again. When he woke Renée was by his side.

She had huddled close to him. Her wide-open eyes were anxiously, lovingly watching his face. The dry pine needles had pressed curious little triangular marks into the softly sun-tinged skin of her thigh. She

smiled at him; her lips were full and moist with the dark red juice of the blackberries. She held a few of them in her cupped hand.

'Open your mouth,' she whispered.

She smelled of the wood. Her lips breathed the moss and the fern, the rock and the sunny water. One by one she let the big glistening berries drop into his mouth, and each time sealed his lips with hers.

'I've come, Joannon,' she murmured. 'I've come.'

He smiled at her, and his hand went caressingly over her hair.

'Yes, my plucky one.'

'Don't you want me now?'

'Yes,' he answered, drawing his arm round her shoulder. 'I want you, my little blackberry bush. I want you very much.'

The great dome of the forest enclosed them with a many-shaded warm green sombreness, and the great green starlight shone in Joannon's eyes as he bent over her. A cuckoo called from afar.

Father Pérégrin, at this hour, was busy sweeping the steps of the church and, with his long-handled broom, clearing the cobwebs from the window. Rémy was sitting on the balustrade, watching him. The door of the church stood open, and now and then odd waves of cold, musty smells came wafting from its dark inside out into the warm sunlit square.

'Well,' said Father Pérégrin, 'so they've gone off and left you alone, haven't they?'

'Oh,' scoffed the boy ill-humouredly. 'I wouldn't have gone with them anyway. I hate picking blackberries.'

The priest nodded understandingly and went on sweeping.

'How can I know it is true what you say?' asked the boy after a while. He had picked up a willow twig and began beating the stone balustrade with it.

'My son,' answered the priest, 'you're still very small, but you might know that it is the business of the servants of the Lord to speak the truth.'

He turned round to him and, resting his arms on his broomstick, looked at the boy.

'So you really know where my father is?'

'I do.'

'And you will take me to him?'

'I've promised it, haven't I?'

The boy nodded.

'But they will look for me when they find I've gone. My mother, the soldier, every one.'

'Will they?' the priest asked interestedly. 'Well, don't worry about that.'

He pulled a large red handkerchief from his cassock and sneezed into it with great violence.

'You've got hay fever,' remarked Rémy, amused.

'Quite,' answered Father Périgrin. 'It's nothing to laugh about. I hope I shan't have to sneeze during the wedding. It would be very embarrassing.'

'When is the wedding?'

'In three days' time.'

'And after the wedding you'll take me to my father?'

'Absolutely. If you can keep your secret. Can you?'

'I can,' Rémy answered indignantly. 'I shall tell no one. And you promise they won't find me?'

'They won't,' said the priest, slightly impatient. 'Now run along. Some one's coming. And keep your mouth shut. Or——'

He waved his broomstick at the little boy, but, seeing that it was old Gidéon who was crossing the square, he quickly thought better of it, dropped the broom, and fled into the church. There he waited until the angry old man had passed. He was not going to have any more arguments. He had enough to think about as it was.

Antonio was waiting on Godefroy's doorstep.

'Monsieur Soldat,' he whispered, 'I must talk to you.'

Godefroy put down the heavy baskets with the blackberries. He waved to Joannon and Renée, who were disappearing, similarly loaded, round the corner of the Barthélemy house. In three days' time, Godefroy thought, they will no longer come and go this way, past our doorstep. They will cross the square at the far end and climb down the steps of the little alley to their own house that looks out over the valley and the mountains and the great forest. In three days' time. It will be a change, and nothing thereafter will be the same.

'Hallo, Antonio,' said Janine. 'How does it go?'

She opened the door, picked up the baskets, and went inside.

'Ah, Madame Janine, God bless you!' the Italian answered. 'How it goes! The corn is cut, and the ricks are up. Look at our blessed fields. Soon we shall bring the harvest in. Ah, the horses of Fabri, they will have a job to do!'

With a weird and undecipherable movement of his spread fingers he described the magnitude of the work to be done by the mighty beasts.

'To-morrow,' he exclaimed, 'I shall bring you a bunch of corn-flowers. A bunch so large!'

Seeing that Janine was no longer there, he smiled; his hands dropped, and his face grew serious.

'Monsieur Soldat,' he said. 'I must tell you; he's spoken to them again, my brother Napoleone.'

'The two men?' demanded Godefroy. 'Where? And when?'

'This afternoon, by the bridge. He talked to them for a long time; I saw it from the field. Also, he gave them something from his pocket.'

'What was it?'

The Italian gave a helpless shrug.

'Oh, Monsieur Godefroy, I don't know. They put their heads together and looked at it in the sun, and then one of them put it in his pocket. It was all on the bridge. Then after a time they touched their hats and walked off.'

'Which way, Antonio?'

'Up the gorge. Into the woods. Where could they have been going?'

He looked at Godefroy questioningly but received no answer.

'Oh,' he sighed and wiped his brow, 'I hope he's not doing something wicked, my brother Napoleone.' Again he looked at Godefroy searchingly. 'I didn't go with him, Monsieur Godefroy, up into the woods to find your aeroplane. I refused to go, and he never said any more about it. Do you think he went alone?'

Godefroy nodded.

'Yes, Antonio. I think he did.'

The Centurion arrived in the middle of the night.

He was tired and hungry and disappointed to find the city asleep

and the square deserted. Somehow he had hoped for a little company after his long journey. But there were no lights in the houses. The night was oppressively hot and of a thick-woven blackness that made it hard to breathe. There were no stars. Now and then a streak of greenish moonlight broke through the cloud ceiling of the sky and disappeared again. It was as if some one with a stable lantern were walking about upstairs, looking for something in the dark, the light of his lantern shining through the gaps between the floor boards whenever he stopped and put it down for a moment. The Centurion found the effect most irritating.

But it wasn't this fickle light which made the old city look so strangely changed. The Centurion looked round in astonishment and at first could not understand at all what had come about. Trees were obviously growing in the square. Young birches were framing the porch of the church and the doors of the houses. Mistletoe, holly, and broom were growing from window sills and ledges; branches of laurel and juniper had joined hands in forming arbours and bowers never before seen. Golden medlars and blue wortleberries glistened in bunches from the foliage; red poppies peered from garlands traversing the square from dormer window to attic, and the fountain was adorned with wreaths of cornflowers.

At the sight of this enchanting transformation the Centurion's rutted old face smiled benignly. How sweet, how happy and expectant it all looked. He liked it. The land, the forest, the fields, and the river had come to his city and had adorned it with a gay and festive garb. What, he asked himself, was it all supposed to mean? He wandered about, staring, shaking his head, muttering to himself. Then, passing the inn, he thought he detected a glint of light under the door. There seemed to be voices, too, inside. He suddenly felt very hungry again, besides being thirsty and curious. He knocked resolutely at the door and then sat down on the bench, waiting for some one to appear.

Out came, after some waiting and further knocking, a sad-looking man with a white face and dishevelled hair and an imposing, severely moustached woman who was hastily tidying her *chevelure*. They stared with open terror at the little old man who was sitting on the bench, for obviously neither of them had seen the Centurion before.

'Ho!' called the Master of the City. 'What is all this for?'

His white, fluff-covered hand pointed at the decorations.

'The wedding!' Madame Rose and Père Nicholas stammered in frightened unison. 'To-morrow——'

'To-morrow? And who is getting married? You two?'

It seemed that nothing could have embarrassed Madame Rose and the baker more than this totally unexpected question. They stared at each other, perplexed and by no means certain whether to feel flattered, insulted, or ashamed.

'No sir,' the baker finally explained apologetically. 'Not us. We're merely engaged on the preparations. That is why you find us up at this late hour. I have only just finished baking the bread for to-morrow, and now I'm busy helping Madame Rose with the wedding cake and the pastries, and Madame Rose, she's preparing——'

'Quite,' answered the Centurion impatiently. 'But who is getting married?'

'The daughter of the patron, sir,' answered Madame Rose. 'Rousset Barthélemy's little daughter. She and Joannon, the shantyman.'

'*Diable!*' exclaimed the Centurion.

He was delighted.

'How pretty!' It wasn't quite clear whether he meant the couple or the festive decorations. 'How lucky for me to have come home just in time! And who's coming? Who are the guests?'

'Every one,' came the answer. 'The patron has invited the whole city.'

'And the King?'

Madame Rose and Père Nicholas glanced at each other in consternation, and then the baker seemed to remember.

'Of course,' he confirmed hastily. 'Naturally. The King too.'

'Are you also invited?' inquired Madame Rose.

The Centurion sat up with a jerk.

'Am I also——' He stared at her. 'My good woman, you don't seem to know——'

But words failed him. He was beside himself. He pulled an angry, speechless face, and in his exasperation his innumerable wrinkles seemed to multiply a thousandfold.

'I'm always invited!' he rasped. 'Always. For hundreds of years I've never been not invited. You understand?'

'Yes,' bowed the baker, although he understood nothing.

'And now,' demanded the Centurion, 'bring me something to eat. Bread. Cheese. An onion. A large tomato. And a glass of wine.'

He grew calm again and, when the meal was before him, became almost friendly. He ate the frugal repast with leisure and deliberation while the two watched him, half frightened, half overawed, from the safety of the doorstep. At last he had finished. He gulped down the rest of the wine, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and rose.

It was then that the two noticed how oddly dressed the stranger was.

Had he changed under their very eyes, or had they, in their perplexity, just not noticed? He wore large, starry horseman's spurs on his boots that shone in the fickle moonlight like bright silver; a red doublet with wide and puffy sleeves and curious slits down their length showing brightly coloured insides, green, blue, and yellow. Across the table lay a long sword in a silver scabbard and with a chiselled hilt which he now picked up and hooked into his belt. On the bench beside him was a wide-brimmed green hat which he now put on and a pair of large white gauntlets which he proceeded to pull on. And finally the satchel which dangled from his shoulder on a strap. He opened it and took from it a coin which he placed beside the empty wineglass.

'Thank you, my good people,' he said solemnly. 'I'm now going home to sleep. I live over there.' His white-gloved hand pointed across the square. 'My name is written above the porch. I do not want to be disturbed.'

He looked at them sharply.

'No noise, understand?' he rasped. 'I'm very tired. Good night.'

He touched his hat and walked off.

'And who may that be, Nicholas?' asked Madame Rose, trying to recover her breath. Then she almost screamed. 'Gracious God! He's left a gold piece! Who was he?'

'Him——' answered the baker.

With a trembling hand he pointed at the wooden sign which was hanging from a wrought-iron arm above their heads, swaying to and fro in the night wind and creaking softly on its hinges.

'Sieur de Roquefort!' muttered Madame Rose.

Then they both fled inside and slammed the door of the inn with a bang.

It woke Rousset Barthélemy, who got out of bed and went to the window. Who the devil was making such an infernal noise at this hour of the night? He looked out into the square. A dim yellow light, as if from a stable lantern, was moving about behind the broken window of the little house opposite. After a while it went out. Against the pale, uncertain moonlight he now saw the shadow of a large, tailless cat wander along the roof top.

Ah, the Centurion, Rousset thought, pleased. He's come for the wedding. Contentedly he went back to bed and to sleep.

14

A ROBIN SANG on the woodsman's porch.

Arise, arise, it sang, it is your wedding day.

Yes, my friend, whistled Joannon from his bed, I haven't forgotten; I haven't forgotten.

He rose and stepped out.

The day had broken radiantly. A blue, sun-woven morning sky was suspended in glittering brilliance over the mountains, the woods, and the valley. Above the yellow fields the dewy air danced with trembling thinness. Summer was at its height. It was going to be a very hot day.

Joannon washed quickly in the large tub which the night before he had placed beside his door. Rubbing his face and arms and whistling to himself, he looked out towards the mountains. Oh, my forests, his happiness sang in him, I have not deserted you. From every window of my new house I can behold you at every hour of day and night, and from my porch, suspended high above the precipice, I look straight into your face. From my house my path leads up into your midst, my trees, and on it I shall for ever be a constant wanderer.

For a long time he gazed out towards the faraway woods. A thin

blue curl of smoke rose from their dark mass in the distance, so faint that it was barely visible, but the woodsman's eyes had caught it immediately. Smoke rising from amidst the woods? he wondered. A forest fire? Then he remembered the day and knew what it was—the Romérage. The beggar pilgrims were gathering for their festival, as every year at this time, at the mountain chapel of St. Arluc by Peyrouton among the ruins of the deserted forest village.

The first of the great gathering had arrived and had lit their camp fires. More and more would arrive during the day, and by to-night hundreds of little columns of smoke would curl up from the forest and mingle with the haze of the evening sky. And he would not be there, not this time. For the first time since he remembered the woods he would not be in their midst on this night, resting by their camp fires, hearing the stories of their wanderings during the year that had passed, listening to their strange, age-old songs, looking into their faces, knowing them all and being known to them all. It was a strange thought that for the first time he would not spend this night of all summer nights under the elm trees of St. Arluc but under the roof of his own house, in new and sweeter company.

Music in stray, wayward bits was now coming up to him from down below. Joannon bent over his wooden balustrade and gazed into the valley. They came, they went, fragments of tunes lovingly familiar, accordion, fiddle, and mandolin, and, true enough, there they were, five ragged bearded fellows who came wandering along the river bank towards the city, on their way to the great gathering in the forest. Small, tattered figures they were in the morning light, but their music travelled clear and distinct on the sunlit air. Joannon waved his white shirt and sent out a long, yelling flourish of greeting and welcome. The pilgrims waved back with their hats and kerchiefs—yes, they were coming. Soon they would be here.

The church bell chimed the hour. So late already? Joannon made haste to get ready—his new white shirt and red silken scarf, his buckskin trousers and freshly polished boots, his green embroidered jerkin. Soon his companions would arrive. Already chatter and noises came from the direction of the square. He took a deep breath. He was ready. And so was his house. From the square came the loud, shrill whistling of a band of boys.

Drunk with sleep and age-old headache, the Centurion put his head out of the window.

Was the night already over; was it day? Morning light flooded the square magically turned forest and meadow. Busily the fountain babbled away, giving generously to those who came with pitchers, buckets, and pails. Doors were opened; children in festive clothes careered round in alleys and passages and among the greenery. Mothers appeared on doorsteps, calling, smiling, laughing; the windows of the inn were unshuttered; under its porch the men began to gather. A band of boys was conducting a whistling concert just below his window.

'Ah, for the mercy of God!' cried the Centurion, holding his palms to his ears. 'Shut up and be quiet. Let me sleep!'

But a volley of laughter greeted him. Furiously he slammed his window. Never had he felt so tired, so exhausted, as on this morning of festivity. How he hated the light of day, its harshness, its blinding shrillness. In despair he went back to sleep. From afar the swelling sound of a mouth organ came through his closed window and wove and buzzed round his head like a swarm of mosquitoes.

Fabri was playing for all his worth on this morning of all mornings. He was having his coffee and hot brioche at Madame Rose's, and in between bites and sips, leaning against the sun-warmed house wall, framed in masses of vine leaves, he played with laughing eyes to his own and the children's delight. This was going to be a day after his own heart, and he meant to enjoy every moment of it. But soon a long, sombre shadow fell across his outstretched feet.

'Ho, Father Pérégrin!' he exclaimed, seeing the curé. 'Not yet in your church?'

'Ah, my son,' answered the priest, 'as you see me here I feel a great need to fortify myself for the occasion.'

Having secured a drink from Madame Rose, he sat down beside the Keeper of the Horses, wagging his bristly head in a curious fashion and obviously ill at ease.

'In my innocent youth,' now rambled Fabri, blinking against the sun, 'I heard it said, Father Pérégrin, that the servant of the Lord is bidden to enter his Master's house jejunely and without breaking his fast. Is this no longer so?'

Father Pérégrin gave him a frightened look.

'I do not feel well, my son,' he mumbled. 'Indeed, I don't feel at all well.'

'You look quite green in the face, it is true,' confirmed Fabri with mocking amusement. 'Pray, has anything befallen you?'

But the priest was not in the mood for many words. He gulped down his drink with an unsteady hand, spilling half of it over his cassock, and rose.

'Now,' he muttered, 'I must ring the bell.'

With an unhappy expression he walked away, rather less fortified, it seemed, than he had come. That one, thought Fabri, he behaves as if this was going to be a funeral. He laughed to himself and went on playing.

Now the crowd began to fill the square, a laughing, beckoning, shouting mass of men, women, and children, their black coats and embroidered jerkins, their coloured blouses and bright scarves glistening in the morning light. Dogs barked excitedly among the rustling skirts; goats and donkeys answered from their nearby stables, and cats, perplexed and frightened by the shrill-voiced bustle, dashed hither and thither between the citizens' feet. Slowly the crowd, steadily swelled by newcomers who came hurrying up the Bourgade from the houses farther below, began to gather round the steps of the church. The hens of Roquefort, led by their cockerel, had arrived in time and taken up position on the ramp of the citadel but amid great cackling and crowing were chased away by a horde of shouting and shrieking children, in their turn led by Rémy, who posted themselves in their stead on the stone railing of the balustrade whence they intended to watch and survey the proceedings. Through it all, happily leaning against the warm, vine-covered wall, Fabri played his little tunes, smiling to his friends and blinking against the sun.

Archambault appeared, clad in festive garb, and with a solemn face crossed the square towards the narrow alleyway that led down to Joannon's house. Soon afterwards the tall, gaunt figure of the King was seen, red goatee, knobbly stick and all, who went the same way—to fetch the bridegroom and lead him to the church. A new gathering had formed round the doorstep of the house of Rousset Barthélemy.

Now the door was opened. Cheers went up and bunches of flowers, poppies, and dog roses and harebells sailed through the sunny air.

'Ah? Again?' asked Fabri. Among the bustling multitude the long, sombre shadow had once more appeared.

'I must fortify myself a little more,' answered the priest. His eyes peered about cautiously. 'I can't say I feel too good,' he murmured, but to Fabri it seemed as if he looked quite happy.

'Soon maybe you'll feel too good!' he suggested laughingly.

'Ah, my son, do not mock!' With a very unsteady hand, but this time miraculously without spilling a drop, Father Pérégrin emptied his glass. 'Now,' he said, bracing himself.

'Now, if I were you I should hurry up. Here they come!'

Here, indeed, they came.

Two alleys had formed in the crowd, one from the far corner of the square, the other from Rousset's door, both leading to the church. Escorted by her father and mother and followed by her solemn and embarrassed-looking brothers, Renée, in shimmering white, a crown of orange blossoms in her dark, shining hair, came forward, a hesitant smile on her lips, her eyes shyly averted. Joannon, flanked by the town's two oldest citizens, the blacksmith on his right, the King on his left, was waiting for her on the lowest step of the church.

Fabri had risen from his seat on the bench. He tried to catch a glimpse of his face. Fumbling his mouth organ, pressed on all sides by the pushing crowd, he stepped on the seat, meaning to send his companion a smile and a cheer. But he had not the courage. And now it was too late. They were moving up the steps, the Barthélemys first, the shantyman and his best men following behind. What a day, what a wonderful day, thought Fabri. He could just see the flush of Renée's smile as she turned round, for a second, to nod at her betrothed; he saw Joannon's broad back, the glistening sunlight mirrored on his oiled hair, and then they had disappeared inside the church. The crowd surged on behind them.

The Keeper of the Horses looked round. Father Pérégrin? He was no longer about. Thank God, he seemed to have remembered his duty in time. The square emptied. Fabri climbed down from the bench and slowly strolled up to the church.

By the porch he discovered Janine, leaning against the door, the

sunlight playing on one half of her face. He smiled at her. She smiled back. She was holding her hands folded in her lap.

'Wait,' he whispered. 'I'll find you a seat inside. You should not be standing.'

But she shook her head.

'No, no,' she answered humbly. 'Don't. I'd better be here. I must not.'

He understood and could not help a sudden warm blush. Cautiously his eyes wandered down her figure. As yet he detected no change. She was beautiful as ever.

'But you, Fabri?' she murmured. 'Why don't you go inside?'

'Me?' he asked in astonishment. 'In my clothes? Like this? Smelling of horse?' He chuckled. 'Oh, never, it wouldn't do.'

And this time she understood and blushed for him, for his meekness and poverty and his tattered, smiling modesty.

'Let's say a little prayer for them,' he whispered. 'Shall we? For Joannon and his Renée.'

But something distracted him. A whisper was running through the crowd inside the church and was reaching the door, now a chuckle, a small, suppressed laughter. What was it? Fabri craned his neck, but he could see nothing. For a few minutes everything was quiet; then suddenly it started again, running through the crowd like a mouse that hurries hither and thither among the pews.

Fabri tapped his neighbour on the shoulder. 'What is it?'

'The curé,' answered Jaubert, who was standing near by. 'It seems something is wrong.'

'The preacher is drunk or something; that's what it is.'

'He's dropped his breviary,' chuckled a youth. 'Twice already.'

'He doesn't know the words.'

Some one laughed softly. People began to nudge each other.

'He's getting it all mixed up. All his prayers and things.'

'What about the rings?' Modeste wanted to know.

'Ssh—he's managing. Thank God.'

Oh, this priest, thought Fabri. One should have known this would happen. I wish I'd never brought him. They will blame it all on me. And rightly too. I wish I'd never seen the fellow.

'Quiet by the door,' an angry old woman hissed.

But it was no sooner said than an infernal noise broke loose in the square. Terrified, Fabri turned round. Lord Almighty God, what was that? Five fellows came marching up the Bourgade and were now turning into the square, two fiddlers, two mandolin players, and an accordionist, five tattered, bearded, crazy-looking fellows with unkempt hair and broken shoes but playing lustily and obviously as loudly as they could. Fabri, with outstretched hands, rushed towards them.

'Hoy!' he cried. 'Stop it! There's a wedding going on!'

The five men halted in the middle of the square and looked at him from dirty and disappointed faces.

'We know,' their leader, an old bearded man who played the accordion, then said. 'That's why we came. Joannon waved us with his shirt. Is it his wedding?'

'It is indeed.'

'Ho, then strike up, you boys. Here they come!'

Helplessly Fabri turned towards the church. A veritable storm of wild, stamping, jubilant music had burst into the stillness of the square and filled it with a most unsolemn uproar. It took Fabri's breath away. How could he restrain Joannon's five tempestuous friends? What should he do?

There was no need to do anything. The friends had timed their noisy greeting well. The ceremony was over, the crowd was at this moment beginning to leave the church. It was now lining up outside on both sides of the steps, forming a passage to let through the bridal couple. Thank God, sighed Fabri, it was over and no new mishap had occurred. Thick round pearls of sweat stood on his unhappy brow and were trickling down his nose and cheeks. How hot it had grown! How indescribably fierce the sunlight was!

There they were. From the sombreness of the church they were now stepping out into the blazing light of the square. Renée on Joannon's arm, laughing, smiling, blinking against the sun. Joannon was apparently greatly amused by Father Pérégryn's obviously incoherent performance; chuckling laughter still sat on his face, and Renée, though rather bewildered and perplexed, laughed with him. Archambault was plainly and undisguisedly outraged, but Rousset Barthélemy, who had more reason than he to be indignant, came out

of the church tugging his big black mop of hair, half laughing, half scornful, wagging his head, and by the time he had reached the steps decided to think it all rather funny and absurd and to leave it at that. Now, after all, was the moment to get the true celebrations started.

The pilgrim musicians thought so too. They had no sooner perceived Joannon and his bride on the steps of the church than they sent an earth-shaking, five-throated volley of cheers into the air.

'Hoy, Joannon and his bride!' cried their bearded old leader, while all five continued to fiddle and scratch away at their instruments with unabating frenzy. 'Salute to you!' they shouted. 'Salute!'

'Salute, my good friends!' Joannon cried back. 'Salute, Boromé, old one! And Canneton! And Barbiche! Grand-Cigogne! Bastien!' He stretched out his hands to greet his friends from the woods, his face beaming with delight and happiness. 'Ah, how chic of you to have come! Salute, the pilgrims of St. Arluc! Welcome to Roquefort!'

'Welcome to Roquefort!' cried Rousset Barthélemy.

He had never seen the five pilgrims before, but Joannon's friends were his friends, and to-day whoever cared to come was welcome in any case.

'Madame Rose!' he exclaimed, swinging his wide black hat above the crowd. 'Madame Rose! Give these men something to drink! Where is Madame Rose? Hoy, let's have a drink, all of us! Madame Rose! Madame Rose!'

Madame Rose was there. Renée and Joannon had been swallowed up by the crowd that pressed round the inn. Glasses were handed round, emptied, spilled, refilled; toasts were drunk, the health and happiness of one and all. The church bell struck the midday hour. It had grown unimaginably hot. Among the hubbub of a hundred voices, cheers, cries, and shrieks only a few of the citizens noticed what went on at the same time at the church. Archambault did, though, and so did old Gidéon, to his fierce delight. For there on the threshold, in the blazing light, a mountain of rustling black fury and indignation, stood La Mère. In one hand she was holding a half-squashed bunch of white dahlias, in the other, by the scruff of the neck, the trembling Father Pérégrin.

'Curé?' she thundered away at the miserable divine. 'A curé—is that what you call yourself? Who's ever seen such a curé, I wonder?'

Who has ever set eyes on so wretched an individual in the service of the Lord?

'Right!' shouted old Gidéon, hitting his palm with his clenched fist. 'Right, I say!'

But La Mère took no notice of his interruptions. Heaving a deep breath and shaking the unhappy man so violently that he seemed almost to fall apart in her very hand, she continued to growl at him.

'Ah! I'm a patient woman, my friend, but not as patient as all that. Who told you to come here anyway?'

'Yes, who told you?' shouted Gidéon.

'Who told you to conduct my only daughter's wedding like a drunken pig?' Her voice trembled; tears stood in her eyes. 'Who do you think you are to make such an unholy mess of my poor little child's wedding? Or are you so drunk and bedeviled even now that you don't realize the disgrace of your behaviour?'

More citizens, carrying their drinks, had turned away from the inn and were gathering round the steps of the church to watch the new spectacle that had unexpectedly opened. They were enormously amused. They laughed and shrieked and hissed and kept nudging each other with their elbows.

But La Mère was not concerned with providing amusement for the guests of the wedding. She was concerned with Father Pérégrin and his disgrace and no one and nothing else.

'What did you do with your prayer book?' she exclaimed, furiously swinging the bunch of dahlias. 'You dropped it. What did you do with the holy wine? You spilled it over my daughter's dress! What did you do with your sermon? You forgot it. And with your prayer? You couldn't remember it. And didn't you in the end nearly fall down the altar steps? Ha, enough! Don't try to excuse yourself. What a priest, what an abomination of a priest!'

'She seems to be very angry with him,' murmured the pilgrim called Great Stork to his fellow pilgrim named Little Beard. 'I wonder what is passing?'

'It doesn't look very serious,' commented the pilgrim called Duck. 'Come on, let's play some more. That's what we're here for.'

'Go!' proclaimed La Mère meanwhile. 'Hide yourself, you unholy

man ! Don't be seen again ! Go, you God-forsaken, besotted fool and eternal disgrace of a preacher, go !

At last, trembling all over her enormous body, she loosened her grip and the dejected churchman, who throughout his painful trial had not uttered a word, came tumbling down the steps and into the arms of Archambault and old Gidéon. He looked about him from wild, frightened boar's eyes, fearing, obviously, to be struck down any moment. He shot a desperate glance over to the inn, apparently considering for a second whether it was opportune and feasible to hide there from the scorn and ridicule of the assembled citizens, but, perceiving that the entrance was blocked, he decided to beat it. With a furious hiss from his bristly snout he shook himself loose and, careering madly through the crowd, round corners and through alleys, past tables, benches, arbours, barrels, cats, dogs, and loving couples in shaded vaults and passages, he disappeared.

'There !' panted La Mère, wiping her hands. 'That'll teach him !'

She, too, was no longer angry. Beaming with delight, she came down the steps.

'Rousset !' she called. 'Fill your wife a glass !'

The sun was at its height. It was time to turn indoors for a while. Already a procession had formed itself to lead the newly married couple to their house. The band of the five pilgrims struck up a new tune. People began to move. Last glasses were hastily emptied. Sweet smells of grilled pork and roast lamb, of onions, artichokes, and fried tomatoes, of garlic, sugared cabbage, strong *poireau*, vinegar, oil, and mustard, of hot plum tart, apple fritters, and baked orange slices with rum and thick, flowing cream pervaded the square and floated upon the still hot air from door to door and window to window.

The square had become empty. The strains of the band were audible from Joannon's house, laughter, too, cheers and loudly shouted blessings as the shantyman, on his strong arms, carried his young bride across his threshold.

Old Gidéon heard it from afar. It did not disturb him.

'Me,' he muttered in the shade of the arbour, 'me, if you ask me——'

He was already very drunk and very hungry and sleepy too. But he

made yet another attempt to raise his half-filled glass to his thin, babbling lips.

'Me, if you ask me——'

'No one is asking you,' belched Jaubert, who sat leaning against the ivy-covered house wall, his hat over his eyes. 'No one, absolutely no one.'

'But,' persisted Gidéon, 'if you ask me I say that man—ah, there, now——' At last he had managed to swallow his drink. He was munching its taste between his toothless lips. 'That man,' he resumed, 'I say, he's no priest at all and never was one. That's what I say.'

He raised his empty glass against the sun and smiled serenely.

'Never was one, Jaubert,' he muttered happily. 'Mark my words, never was one. Are you still there?'

Jaubert wasn't. He had gone, but his departure did not in the least surprise old Gidéon. He put his glass on the ledge of the window and pulled up his trousers.

'Come on,' he said to himself, or was it to an imagined companion? 'Come on, let's go and eat. To-day we're all the guests of the patron. To-day we'll eat well. Ah, a fine man, our patron. A great man. A wise man. A good man is our patron. Come on, let's go now; we're hungry.'

Slowly, on insecure feet, he stumbled off across the square in the direction of the Barthélemy house. Behind him his empty glass was slowly sliding down the slanting ledge of the window. It fell and broke on the sun-baked cobblestones, sending a silvery singing note through the still midday air.

The shadows grew longer.

Behind the church on a tuft of grass, amid the ruins of the city ramparts, sat Father Pérégryn and had his meal, peaceful and unobserved. It was a good meal, notwithstanding the absence of jolly company: half a roast duck quietly abducted from Madame Rose's kitchen, half a bottle of red wine collected in passing from the soldier's doorstep, and an apple tart which had sat waiting for him in the shade of La Mère's back window and had willingly followed him although, owing to overhastiness, it had unfortunately broken in two. He had

finished the duck, almost finished the tart, and was coming near the end of the bottle when, looking out from his perch into the gathering afternoon, he heard a faint voice.

'Ho, Cogolin!' some one said in a strange, airy whisper. 'So it is you. How did you get here?'

The preacher looked up and at first couldn't see anyone. The airy voice repeated its words. And now he perceived, in the hot, shimmering light of the afternoon, the outlines of him who had spoken. He was a little man, very old and oddly costumed, but the preacher recognized him at once. He was terrified at the apparition. He was not at all sure whether the man was there or not. His contours, as if drawn by wisps of floating blue smoke, danced up and down before him in the bluish light, now quite distinct, now almost indiscernible, and all the time disconcertingly transparent.

'Tressaille!' he muttered. 'You?'

'Me, indeed,' answered the transparent man. His voice was still only a whisper, but it had nevertheless taken on an unmistakably angry tone. 'How did you get here, Cogolin? I'm very displeased to see you about. Have you forgotten you're my prisoner?'

The preacher stared at him who was dancing up and down above the precipice but was too frightened to answer.

'How did you get out of the citadel?' rasped the little man. 'Don't pretend you're some one else. I've recognised you all right, although it's a long time ago. You're out for mischief, I'm sure, as you were before. Théophile Cogolin, Bishop of Barcelonette, and that is why I took you prisoner and locked you up. I really cannot understand how you got out of the citadel, you bad man, since I have the key and no one else. Answer, Théophile Cogolin——'

The preacher was petrified. For a second it occurred to him that he might answer that he wasn't called Théophile at all but Pérégrin, but he feared the Chevalier de Tressaille would see through him, as indeed he, Cogolin, was able to see bodily through the transparent Master of the City.

'Go,' hissed the little old man, and it sent a shiver down his spine despite the heat. 'Make haste and go before I summon my men and have you incarcerated for the second time. We caught you the first time, remember, when you stole into this city in disguise to betray it

to your master, Sir Jehan le Noir. So—hop ! What are you still hanging round for? Go and join your master and leave this city alone. Vanish—disappear before I count three or——’

‘I’ll go,’ answered the trembling priest. ‘I’m going.’

Cold sweat was trickling down his neck and forehead. Anxiously he waited for the airy voice to count until three, but it had grown so thin that he could no longer hear it. When he looked up the transparent cavalier had gone. Blue dusk was gathering in the valley and above the mountains. The air seemed full of shadows, figures, faces, voices. He rose and mopped his brow.

‘It’s time,’ he murmured to himself. ‘It’s the last moment.’

He fumbled for the pocket in his cassock, took out a small chit of paper and a pencil stump, and hastily, in the failing light, wrote a few words on it. As he wrote the noise of music and laughter and singing penetrated to his ears. It grew louder and louder, and now it was accompanied by the chatter and stamping of feet on the cobblestone pavement of the square. He peered over his shoulder. The first lights had appeared. Lampions in many colours were swaying brightly in the breeze. The music grew more and more frenzied and terrifying. The laughter of the men, the shrieks and cries of the women filled the air as the impetuous dance went round and round the square. It seemed to draw nearer, to drive and chase him and almost to push him over the precipice.

With a trembling hand he finished his scribble. An air of fierce defiance now sat grinning on his ugly face. He was frightened. But he was also frightening. He wasn’t going to be rattled by the big noisy hunt that was on. He wasn’t going to be cast into the dungeons of Roquefort citadel for a second time. Not he. Time was up. But not only for him.

‘For all of you,’ he whispered, and hurried away.

The flowering summer moon had risen over the dancing city.

It was three quarters full. But the sky had not yet quite darkened, and it seemed as if it never would this night. It was of a deep, velvety blue, and the moonlight cast a pale and liquid bloom on its mat expanse that gave it a dewy lustre. Its steady, even light mingled oddly with the city’s turbulent and festive illuminations, with lanterns

flickering from windows and ledges, lampions swaying in many colours above the heads of the dancers, moving torches, and windows aglow with the reflections of all of them.

The music never ceased.

The five pilgrims were heavy with wine and at times heavier still with somnolence. But drunkenly they played on, and more wine chased away their sleepiness. From drowsy, lingering tunes of their faraway homelands they suddenly awoke after a quick gulp from their tumblers and broke forth anew into the wild and joyous melodies of their ancestral dances. They were men who had wandered far and wide, from the shores of the sea to the summits of the glacier country, and their memories were deep and inexhaustible. They had settled down on the steps of the fountain, and the Barthélemy boys went to and fro between them and the inn where, stacked on the porch, were the wine barrels from which they kept their glasses and beakers filled.

The wine shone on their beards and illuminated their eyes and cheeks, and they greeted the dancing pairs, as they passed the fountain, with shrill wild shrieks and sudden raucous shouts of encouragement that were answered with calls and yells from the dancers, until it all merged again in the vast, tumultuous sea of laughter and music and shuffling feet. Now and then the church bell would strike the hour, but none would stop to count its strokes or heed its call. The young men had lighted their torches of dry lavender stalks and leaves and danced, shaking them over the heads of their girls. Their strong, smoky scent, their phosphorescent light pervaded the arbours and made their foliage gleam, and above the roofs of the old city lingered straggling clouds of thick, fiery smoke that smelled of the woods and the mountains on fire and slowly sailed away towards the moon. Its scent made the young girls giggle and the old women on their doorsteps shake their drowsy, tipsy heads.

'Ho!' cried Joannon above the heads of the crowd. 'Ho, the musicians!'

The Great Stork lifted his head from his accordion.

'Now the farandole!'

'The farandole!' echoed the crowd. 'The farandole!'

The pilgrims broke off for a moment and had a long draught from their tumblers. Old Boromé laid his mandolin aside and drew from

his pocket his long flute. Fabri, who had stepped on the fountain behind them, had found a tambourin.

'Oh,' a long-drawn-out voice began to sing. '*Oh, vous qui passez—*'

It was Joannon from amid the crowd. His left arm round the waist of Renée, his right hand raised above the multitude, he gave the signal.

*'Oh, vous qui passez là-bas sur le chemin,
Ecoutez, c'est la farandole!'*

The musicians had fallen in, and with them Fabri's tambourin. The pairs of dancers had dissolved. Now they were taking each other by their hands, forming a long, winding, endless chain of dancers, and as the dance began their voices joined the music and soon broke into one great chorus.

*'Vous qui passez là-bas sur le chemin,
Ecoutez, c'est la farandole!
Le bruit joyeux et fou du tambourin
Qui monte au ciel et qui s'envole!'*

It was Joannon's voice, still his clear, jubilant voice of the great forest that soared above them all, meeting in triumphant unison with old Boromé's flute, and together they sailed, like two birds, through the flaming, torchlit night.

'*Jusqu'au matin—*' Joannon began anew.

And the chain of dancers, winding across the square, through alleys and passages, back into the square, hither and thither like a rolling sea, fell in.

*'Jusqu'au matin le vin coule en ruisseau,
Et toutes les femmes sont folles!
Un chant d'amour vibre aux échos!
Sur le coteau,
Ohé, ohé, chantez fortissimo!
C'est la farandole!'*

With long resounding clangs that wove sombre and luminous strands into the ebbing pattern of music and laughter and song, the church bell struck.

Midnight.

Rousset Barthélemy raised his dreamy head. His half-filled glass stood before him on the table, and he lifted it lovingly and amid the dying music held it against the light. Then with a serene, happy smile he emptied it. This had been a wonderful day. Oh, Catulle, my grandfather, he thought, how you would have loved it. Oh, my forefathers, he mused, how happy I am to have you sit with me on this night of all nights, round the barrel and sharing the good wine of Roquefort! Have you seen our blessed fields? The corn is cut all over the Land of the Hundred Hills, and to-morrow we shall start bringing it in, Another glass, my good forefathers! The health of my happy children! Salute!

'Salute, Barthélemy!' answered a voice beside him.

Rousset smiled and raised his glass.

'Fortune!' he said. 'I'm glad you've turned up at last. Sit down. Where've you been all day long?'

'Oh, just now I've been dancing a bit,' answered the Centurion. His cheeks under their white fluffy beard were flushed, it was true, and his sharp bird's eyes gleamed with mocking pleasure. 'They didn't see me, I think. I didn't want to frighten anybody. But I like the farandole; oh, I like it very much. And I'm sorry the musicians are packing up.'

'It's past midnight,' nodded Rousset. 'And they still have a long way to go, poor chaps.' He chuckled. 'They want to get to the Romérage before daybreak. I wonder whether they're going to make it, with all the wine in their feet.'

It had grown quieter in the square. The pilgrims had risen from their seats on the steps of the fountain and were making ready to depart. Soft, sweet music was still humming through the night, but now it was only Fabri who, sitting cross-legged under the tall agave, was playing his mouth organ for himself, for the moon and two or three couples of lovers who wandered around, oblivious of everything but the sweetness of the night which Joannon's festival had given them.

Joannon was saying good night and farewell to his friends. He filled their pockets with corked bottles of wine, pastries, and food for the journey. As they turned to go old Boromé, casting a last and drunkenly forlorn glance towards the inn where the men were still sitting over

their wine, suddenly stopped and with a whisper beckoned his companions. They nodded and put their heads together. Then they smiled and hastily got their instruments ready again. Suddenly, into the quietude of the night, they struck up again, and Boromé, with his full, rolling voice, sang:

*'Oh, le bon sieur de Tressaille,
Il part gaiement en bataille,
Il ne craint pas la mort,
Le brave sieur de Roquefort!'*

The Centurion sat up like a bolt. For a moment he stared about him in confusion. His thin, bearded lips trembled; his hands fingered the large silver buttons of his jerkin; his eyes blinked, and a couple of thin, watery tears rolled down his old crumpled cheeks.

'They know it,' he murmured. 'They still know it, the old song!'

He nodded to Rousset, to Fortescue, to Archambault and the other men who had gathered round him, and a smile of overwhelming happiness shone from his eyes.

'Play it again!' he called with a tear-stricken voice. 'Please, my good people, sing it again!'

He fussed and fumbled for his leather satchel and got out some coins. With a trembling hand he tossed them towards the singers, and, gleaming and golden, they rolled over the cobblestones where the pilgrims, with bowing reverence, picked them up.

They sang and played the old song once more, and under its forceful, rhythmic strains the Master of the City collected himself again. With folded hands he sat and listened, immeasurable delight in his wrinkled face.

'How long ago! Oh, how long ago!' he muttered. 'Oh, who can remember the time when they sang this song, up and down the country, everywhere? You remember, don't you?' He turned to the King. 'Yes, you remember, for it was sung when we rode together against the great Jehan le Noir! Your own men sang it, sire, on the day of the great battle of Peira-Colonna——' He was talking to himself. He had not noticed that the pilgrims had ceased to play and had departed down the Bourgade. He was still humming it to himself, the old tune.

'Oh, the good Sire de Tressaille—He rides so gaily into battle—He feareth not death——'

Abruptly he fell silent. With a swift gesture he passed his hand over his brow. He sat up and looked at the men.

'Barthélemy,' he said gravely, 'did I forget? I came here to tell you something. I should have almost forgotten.'

His voice had grown stern, his eyes sombre.

'What's troubling you?' asked Rousset dreamily.

'He's back,' announced the Centurion. 'He has returned.'

'Who has?'

'The great Jehan le Noir. I passed Peira-Colonna three days ago. He has built it up again from its ruins. It is a big, mighty place.'

His trembling hand once more passed over his wrinkled forehead as if to brush away impatiently shadows and images that now seemed to crowd upon him from all sides.

'Or——?' he asked, and looked at Rousset doubtfully.

Then he sighed.

'I'm getting so old, my friend, you must forgive me. My mind is no longer always quite clear. It sees so many things at the same time, hears so many voices at once. I'm dreadfully tired, no matter how much I sleep. I slept all to-day and still I forget even the most important things. Had it not been for this old song I might not have remembered at all.'

He shook his head disconsolately.

'Never mind, Tressaille,' said the King, and filled his glass.

'But——' interrupted Rousset, who had suddenly awakened from his reverie. He propped his bearded chin in his palm and stared at the Centurion. 'But how can he be back; how can he have returned, this Jehan le Noir, if he was killed and buried under the rubble of his castle with all his men, four hundred years ago, as you told me yourself? That's what I'm asking myself.'

'And your grandfather too!' added the Centurion eagerly. 'You're quite right. He was killed too.' He shook his head. 'Now how that fits together—still——'

'But you're getting it all mixed up again,' said Rousset. 'I told you before my grandfather didn't get killed in that battle——'

'But his sons!' exclaimed the Centurion triumphantly. 'The sons

of Jehan le Noir survived! Of course they survived. And their sons, and their sons' sons—maybe it's one of them who returned?

He grew visibly angry at his own confusion.

'No,' he then decided. 'I have seen him; with my own eyes I've seen him, Le Noir the Great, three days ago, riding on a black horse through the gate of his house. It was him. He has returned. Yes. Don't try to confuse me, Barthélemy. Listen to what I say.'

Suddenly he shot round his seat.

'What's the matter?' he rasped. 'Who's calling?'

'It's the soldier,' said the King.

'Ho, patron!' Godefroy called from his doorstep. 'Ho, Joannon!'

'What is it?' asked Rousset.

'Anyone seen the boy? Little Rémy?'

'No. Why?'

'He's gone.'

'He's what?'

'Gone. Disappeared.'

The soldier came across towards the inn. His face was worried and excited. Behind him, in the lighted opening of his door, appeared the shadow of Janine, casting anxious glances across the square and down the Bourgade.

'Rémy!' her faltering voice called. 'Rémy!'

'We've been looking for him all over the place,' said Godefroy. 'For almost three hours now we've been searching, but we can't find him anywhere. I didn't tell you right away because I didn't want to upset the festivities. But now Janine is getting so frightfully worried. And I—well, I just can't understand it. The boy's gone. As if swallowed by the earth, in the middle of the night, and——'

'Calm yourself, soldier,' said Fortescue. 'He'll——'

'He'll turn up all right,' said Rousset. 'It's one of his boy's tricks, I'm sure.'

'Oh, it's a trick all right, surely,' answered Godefroy impatiently.

'What is this?' asked Nicholas, the baker, who had in the meantime appeared in the door of the inn. 'Madame Janine's little boy has disappeared? No, no. I saw him only a short while ago. With the curé.'

'With the curé?'

'Where?'

'How long ago?'

A storm of questions was raging round the baker's head, and it threw him into utter dismay and confusion. He raised his hands pleadingly while casting fearful glances at his old friend Archambault, who had risen from his seat and assumed a threatening posture.

'Well, where is he?' demanded the blacksmith.

'I don't know,' babbled the baker. 'I couldn't tell—but I saw him only a few hours ago. I was in the bakehouse to get some pastries I had stored there, and when I looked up I saw them pass outside my door—yes, little Rémy, Madame Janine's boy, and the curé. I don't know where they went—they were walking round the back. I think up the steep alley behind Valette's house, you know—no, I don't think they carried anything, or wait—yes, I seem to remember. The preacher, he was carrying his hat and stick and a tied bundle too—coming to think of it, they seemed rather in a hurry. It didn't occur to me—I was so busy—but, coming to think of it now——'

'Oh, shut up, Nicholas,' growled Archambault. 'You make one sick with that bread-paste mind of yours. What a scatterbrain you are! Why didn't you tell us right away?' He sniffed and then spat between his boots. 'So that lovely priest of ours has gone off with Janine's boy. The *salaud*! The *canaille*! I could wring his bloody dirty neck if only I could lay my hands on him. But we'll find him. By God, we'll find him all right!'

'I'm not surprised he's bolted,' said Rousset. 'After the mess he made of the wedding.'

'And the sermon he got from your wife,' said Jaubert.

'Ha, but he'll get it!' snorted Archambault. 'He'll get it, from me personally.'

'He never came here just to be a priest and for the love of it,' said Fabri with a worried face. 'He just pretended. That's why he fell down on the wedding. He was after something else.'

'You ought to know,' snapped Gidéon. 'You brought him here.'

Fabri gave him a sad, discouraged look. 'I knew you would say that one day.'

'Kidnapping little boys,' said Modeste. 'That's what he was after.'

No use blaming Fabri. It isn't his fault. We've got to find that devil and——'

'Wring his neck!' insisted Archambault. He was quite red in the face. 'With my own hands. Personally.'

'But why did he do it? And where have they gone?'

'Wait a minute,' said Fortescue. 'Some one's coming up the Bourgade.'

It was Antonio. He was all in a flutter and in a great hurry.

'Monsieur Soldat!' he called already from the corner. 'Are you there, Monsieur Soldat?'

'Now what does he want, I wonder?' asked Archambault.

'Monsieur Godefroy,' panted the excited Italian as he reached the inn. 'My brother Napoleone——' His thin, spread fingers described a sweeping and wholly enigmatic figure in the air. 'It's most extraordinary; my brother Napoleone, he's gone; yes, he's totally gone, baggage and all. *Dio mio*, what is he up to?'

'You mean he's cleared out?' asked Godefroy. 'With his wife?'

'Oh no, not his wife!' replied Antonio. 'His wife, he's left her behind in a great ocean of tears, and she comes to me and says, "Antonio, I will now drown myself in the river because my Napoleone has deserted me."'

'And where's he gone?' demanded Rousset.

'Ah, *padrone!*' Antonio flung his hands into the air. 'Do I know? He's a clever man, my brother Napoleone; he's got many secret ideas.'

'So he has!' retorted Archambault. 'Putting his head together with that drunkard of a preacher. I've seen it myself. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they'd gone the same way together, the dirty lot. Not a bit surprised would I be.'

'Do you understand any of this, Godefroy?' asked Rousset.

The soldier nodded. 'I'm beginning to, patron,' he said quietly.

'It's a plot,' said Jaubert. 'That's what it is. A plot.'

'Quiet,' said Fortescue. 'Here comes Janine.'

Godefroy turned round.

'What is it, *grappa?*' he asked. 'The baker says the boy went with the curé. And Napoleone has run away too.'

But Janine didn't hear him.

'Look!' she said breathlessly. 'I just found this on the kitchen table. What is it?' In her trembling hand she was holding a crumpled slip of paper. Nervously she tried to smooth its creases, then with a despairing sigh put it before the men on the table. 'What does it mean? Something's written on it, but I can't read it. What does it say?'

'Let me see,' said Fortescue.

'No,' said a quiet voice. 'Give it to me.'

In their excitement they all had quite forgotten the Centurion. But the Master of the City was still in their midst, sitting behind his wine-glass under the lamp, and as they looked at him they thought he was asleep, so quietly, so motionless, and without a breath was he sitting there. The white light of the lantern made his sparse hair and fluffy beard shine like snow on hard, rutted winter earth. For a moment he did not even look like a living being at all. He looked like a dead, knobby old tree overgrown with a white-flowering weed, and his brown, earthy hands that held the slip of paper resembled dead branches that trembled slightly in the night wind now and then.

Janine gripped Godefroy's arm.

'Him!' she whispered. 'I know him. The rider on the clouds.'

'One would say he's dead,' murmured Antonio. 'The old monsieur.'

'What passes?' asked a soft voice behind Godefroy's back.

The soldier turned. It was Joannon.

'It's happened,' he said.

Joannon nodded.

'Sh-sh,' hissed Rousset Barthélemy. 'He's saying something.'

The Centurion opened his lips.

'I don't understand it,' he said with a faint, almost inaudible voice.

'I can read it all right. But I cannot understand its meaning.'

'What does it say?' begged Janine in a trembling voice.

'It says this: "*Your son has returned to his father's house. If you're looking for him that is where you will find him.*" That's what it says.'

'And where,' asked Rousset Barthélemy into the stillness, 'is his father's house?'

Janine felt all eyes on her. But she was calm. Quiet and composure had returned to her face as she stood in the circle of the men. For a second her eyes wandered over them, one after the other, their good,

earnest faces. Dark, dreaming, child-hearted Rousset Barthélemy; gruff and irrefragably faithful Archambault. Gaunt, dour, quizzical King Fortescue. Brave, dry Modeste. Stubborn Jaubert. Rash and tempestuous little Valette. Fabri, shy and full of love. Antonio even, helpless and so eager to help. And Joannon, the silent, star-eyed son of the forest. Friends, all of them, the soldier's constant and trusting companions. At last her eyes rested on the Master of the City. Wide open and resolute, they gazed at him, looked through him even, comprehending, knowing, through the walls of the house and beyond into a far distance.

'It is,' she said calmly, 'at Peira-Colonna.'

Then she cast a swift glance at Godefroy, at Joannon. The two men nodded.

'Yes,' said the son of the forest with a voice clear and limpid, like running water. 'That's the way we figure it.'

At these words the Centurion opened his eyes. Through the withered foliage of the arbour he gazed up into the sky.

'I told you he had returned,' he said.

Then he rose.

'I must go now and sleep,' he announced with a dry and oddly toneless voice. 'Dawn is drawing near and I'm very, very tired. Let me rest for a few hours. I'll be with you when you need me. Good night, my good people.'

'Good night,' they answered.

As he walked away from them, across the square and towards his house, his outline seemed to grow thinner and less and less distinct. In the middle of the square he halted. He had become almost transparent. He seemed to turn half round.

'There,' he whispered. 'I shall be there, in my house.'

His outstretched hand pointed towards the tumble-down small cottage at the corner of the square with the odd, illegible inscription chalked on the lintel of its door. It was a similar handwriting, they now saw, as on Janine's slip of paper. People hundreds of years ago might have written like this. Their eyes followed the little man, but presently, and before he had reached his door, his figure had dissolved. They remembered his voice as no more than the soft whisper of the approaching morning wind.

'Let's get ready,' said Joannon. 'We should be off as soon as it gets light.'

'I wouldn't ask you to come,' said Godefroy.

'I know the way,' answered the woodsman. 'More or less.'

He smiled at the soldier.

'We've been on the road together before,' he said light-heartedly, 'haven't we? Well, this is where the road goes on.'

'Not to-night, Joannon.'

'To-night is over,' said Rousset Barthélemy. 'This thing, soldier, it doesn't concern you alone. Or Janine. It concerns us all. Who shall go?'

'The soldier,' said Joannon, 'Archambault. Myself.'

'And I,' said Janine.

Joannon slowly turned to her. She met his scrutinizing glance frankly and unerringly. She knew what he thought but would never utter and she fought it down in him with her eyes. Deep in her heart she felt a pang of pity, of motherly sorrow for him. He was so young this night, despite his manly years. The hurry and confusion of his happiness still shone about him: his white shirt open at his throat, his boots hastily and only half laced, his trousers hurriedly and unevenly buttoned, and his belt still unclasped.

He looked down on himself with an embarrassed smile.

'You must know,' he answered, 'it's a long way.'

'It's shorter than the way I've come,' she answered.

He nodded. 'I'm not saying no.'

It was growing cold. Godefroy shivered. He buttoned up his shirt and unrolled his sleeves. The men were turning to their houses. Here and there a lamp was lit, an early fire kindled.

'The pawn, *grappa*,' said Godefroy. 'He's got the pawn.'

'Yes,' she answered. 'But I didn't take it to him, Godefroy. He had to steal it. And now he'll have to surrender it. To me he'll have to surrender it. The pawn. My life. The years. The past. The present. The future. Everything. Into my hands.'

'You're brave, *grappa*,' he answered. 'Very, very brave.'

He kissed her. Her lips were cold and moist and tasted of the dew of the approaching morning. He lifted his eyes and gazed out towards the dark mountain peaks whence the grey of dawn must come. For

the first time he recognized the faces of the mountains. The buried years had risen all around him, and they stared at him from blind, unseeing eyes.

15

THE CHURCH BELL struck four. Dawn was breaking.

'Let me go with you,' said Renée.

'No,' answered Joannon. 'Make some coffee and get some provisions ready in the haversack. We may not find much to eat on the way. There. It's happened before, me going up into the woods for a few days, and it's going to happen again. Often, even.'

'You're not making it easy for me.'

'I'm making it as easy as it is, Rée. I'm trying to.'

He went to the corner of the room and picked up his shotgun which was leaning against the wall. He took it outside and sat down on the porch to look it over.

'You see the path that comes down from the gorge towards the bridge?' he asked, pointing into the rising light. 'That's where I come and go, each time, Rée. You wait for me, here on this porch, and you will see me come down that path.'

She came out on the porch carrying a cup of hot coffee which she put on the doorstep beside him.

'You see?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered and went back.

'Will you be taking your knife too?' she asked from inside. 'Your long hunting knife?'

'Yes,' he answered from the porch. 'The knife too. And give me the small cardboard box at the back of the top drawer.'

She brought it out to him, and he poured the cartridges into the side pockets of his leather jerkin.

'Let me go with you, Joannon,' she said.

'No,' he answered. 'No, Rée.'

'You talk as if you were merely going to find this little boy and

bring him back and that was all. But you're going because of something else besides. What is it?

He looked up from his gun. He was holding the cup in his hand.

'I don't know, Rée. It's to see and find out what it is that I'm going.'

'Yes, my love,' she answered. She took the cup from his hand and drank the rest of the coffee that was left in it. 'I'll wait for you here on the porch, as you say.'

After he had gone she watched the bridge and the path and the rising day above the country of Vargelonnes, and after the four small figures, three men with shotguns slung over their backs and a woman in their midst, had passed across the bridge and climbed the path up into the gorge and disappeared in the forest, she went on watching. The sun was about to rise from its bed among the glaciers. Already the trees were clad in a cold, metallic sheen. Renée watched the path and remembered the first day. In her memory it had become the first day of her life. 'What have you got that big knife for?' she asked. The woodsman raised his head and looked up where she stood behind him on the jutting piece of flat rock above the swirling river. 'To cut branches with,' he answered quietly, with a soft voice like running water. 'To make firewood, kill rabbits, all sorts of things.' 'What else?' she asked. 'Nothing else,' he answered. He smiled at her, and the golden spark shone in his dark green eyes.

She looked up. The sun had risen. Its light, like molten metal, had flooded the sky. The forests of Vargelonnes, the woodland, the fields and pastures seemed on fire.

They followed the course of the river, climbing steadily, at times steeply, along its left bank, into the rising thickness of the forest. The path was narrow, and often their feet slipped on the dry pine needles that were moist with glistening, beady morning dew, on mossy pebbles and wet, naked roots. Often, too, the path was barred by fallen trees and masses of white shining boulders which the mountain side had unexpectedly thrown up. Joannon had come and gone this path many times before, and never, he thought, had it been quite the same. Each time it had to be explored anew. The mountain side, the forest, the river were never at rest. They were for ever working, labouring,

changing, shifting, and remoulding. Big white stone blocks, firmly sunk into the ground and overgrown with moss, had suddenly moved hundreds of yards farther down, where they looked at you from their new places as if it were quite natural that they should be there and as if they had never been anywhere else. Giant tree trunks that had lain across the path for years, summer and winter, had suddenly and silently been cleared away without trace; others had fallen in new places; streams of shining white pebbles were unexpectedly running criss-cross in all directions through the wood where formerly Joannon remembered merely the dark, soft, undisturbed carpet of moss, and he wondered and puzzled whence they could have come and smiled as he looked about him while he climbed, content and happy to know his great wood alive.

They walked in pairs, Janine and Godefroy in front so that Janine might set the pace, and Joannon and Archambault following them. The river rushed past them from the unseen height, tossing its hurling, swirling water in foaming, copper-coloured leaps over boulders and tree trunks with a noisy and angry delight. The tall firs on either side still stood asleep, shrouded in their grey nightly garb. Mist in flat, thin layers was floating between their feet and above the turbulent water. The small birds were already awake; they sat chattering in groups on the moss-covered stones in midstream. The large birds were still asleep. Now and then one of them would appear, sail silently on motionless wings across the gushing river from tree-top to tree-top, and disappear again. Gradually the blinding shrillness of the red sun-coloured water faded into yellow that grew paler and paler and then into greyish blue. The trees cast off their misty shrouds and stood in dark, glistening green. The sky above turned from its fiery agitation into a soft, fluffy grey that soon dissolved, revealing a thin and hesitant blue, sweet and virginal and as yet unravaged by the hot and tempestuous caresses of the summer day.

Joannon and Archambault halted for a moment and looked back. Far away and deep down below, at the gate to the open land of the hills, perched on the top of the uplifted rocky thumb, sat Roquefort, a tiny, brown-grey cluster of walls and roofs, silent, asleep, without a stir of life, it seemed, shrouded in the drifting veils of morning mist. Archambault lit his pipe.

'What are you looking for?' he asked.

'My house,' answered Joannon. 'My roof.'

'Can you make it out?'

The woodsman nodded.

'Still,' said Archambault, 'it's a small place. Small enough to hold in the palm of one's hand.' He held out his hand. 'Like that. Very small.'

They turned again and continued on their way.

'She walks well, the woman,' said the blacksmith. 'Considering her state. A strong woman.'

Joannon nodded. 'And with a will,' he said, 'With a will like a vine. It grows exactly the way it means to, with the will of the whole earth in its stem. You bend it; you tie it; you cut it. No—it goes on growing its own way.'

'You're saying things,' answered the blacksmith.

'Yes,' said Joannon. 'Sometimes.'

He pushed his hands into the pockets of his leather trousers and began to whistle softly to himself as he climbed on. Archambault looked at him from time to time, and it seemed to him that the woodsman must be very happy. He walked without effort; the soles of his boots seemed hardly to touch the ground. They moved swiftly, surely, happily. That one, thought the blacksmith, I'll never understand him.

'How far is it?' he asked.

'I'm not sure. Got your watch?'

Archambault pulled it from his pocket. It was a very large and fat old steel watch on a steel chain and looked as if it weighed at least a pound. It showed half-past eight.

'A couple of hours more to Peyrouton,' said Joannon. 'There we'll have a rest and I'll make some inquiries. The forest comes to an end soon after Peyrouton. Afterwards it's the plateau, and we'll have to see. It depends.'

Archambault nodded. He didn't mind the length of the way. 'How do we know we're going to the right place?' he asked. 'I mean that the boy is where we think he is?'

'We don't. We've figured it out.'

'And this man Le Noir. Are we sure?'

Joannon shook his head. 'Can't be. I've never seen him. No one I know has, in fact. But one's putting two and two together.'

The two in front of them had stopped and were looking back, waiting for them to catch up. Godefroy questioningly pointed into the forest to the right. A new river had appeared, smaller than the Varouse but very swift. It came down from the right and joined the Varouse at a sharp angle, forming a pool at the point of junction.

'The Cassine,' said Joannon. 'Just follow it. It leads straight to Peyrouton. A pretty stream.'

He was serenely happy. The purpose of the journey and how it was going to be accomplished did not seem to occupy his mind at all. He looked at the trees as he walked, at the river, the bushes, and shrubs, and a wistful little smile played round his pursed lips all the time. Now and then he seemed altogether to forget his company. He strayed off the path, telling the others just to go on, disappeared in the thicket, emerged again a little later clad in green light, sauntering ahead on soundless feet, whistling softly between his teeth, smiling. This is, thought Godefroy, how he must have lived in earlier days before he came to the city, in all those years among the trees before he left the great forest and settled among men.

They had left the Varouse behind and were following the rapid, chattering Cassine. The climbing had become less steep but the path much more difficult. In fact, there was no path at all, but broken twigs here and there, down-trodden bracken, large footprints in the moss showed that some one must have fought his way through this thorny wilderness before them, and not so long ago.

'The pilgrims,' remarked Joannon. 'This here must be the Great Stork. That fellow has feet as large as an elephant.'

'And this Le Noir,' said Archambault. 'He may not exist at all, then?'

'If you believe only in the things you've already seen,' replied Joannon.

His voice had a curiously airy and lofty tone which slightly irritated Archambault.

'Well,' he murmured, 'this is an odd kind of trip, isn't it?'

'It is,' smiled Joannon. 'But never mind. We'll find them.'

'Me,' said Archambault, 'I'm only interested in the preacher. As long as I find him, all goes.'

He thought Joannon would ask him what he proposed to do to the preacher if he found him, but the woodsman didn't. It was just as well, for Archambault didn't really know himself. He had a vague idea that he might kill the man, but as he was, at least, a very peaceful being and had never killed anyone before, he found it difficult to imagine it. Lost in his thoughts, he walked on, steadily upwards where the light was beginning to shine through the trees. The clearing must be near.

'Ho, Joannon,' said a deep voice suddenly from nowhere. 'It's you all right, isn't it?'

'Ho, Barbiche,' answered the woodsman. 'What passes?'

A tall bearded man had stepped from the foliage.

'They sent me to wait for you here. We thought you would sooner or later come up. You're looking for the preacher and the little boy?'

'Have you seen them?' asked Janine.

Barbiche nodded. 'Boromé is waiting for you at the village.'

The dead hamlet of Peyrouton lies secluded and hidden away in a small clearing high up in the forest, and you don't see it until you are almost upon it. In former times the clearing must have been much larger, large enough to embrace a field or two and some pasture land; it may even have been open towards the plain and the plateau, for beyond the village the wood is of a different kind; the trees are younger and stand more sparsely with scant undergrowth. But now almost nothing is left of the clearing. Pine and oak, wild fig tree and cypresses of all sizes and ages have advanced from all sides towards the white cluster of dead houses and taken possession of their abandoned remnants. The trees are everywhere in Peyrouton. They have walked right into the village, into houses and barns; they have crossed every threshold and installed themselves behind windows and in open doors; they are growing through roofs and walls, and as they grow gradually they pull the white stone of Peyrouton down and back to the earth. Roofs fall; walls crumble; lonely chimney stacks suddenly sink to dust, victims of the silent, relentless rapacity of the trees.

The pilgrim beggars are at home at Peyrouton. The Chapel of St. Arluc stands on the far side of the clearing, almost hidden in a thick cluster of cypresses and huge elm trees, and here they foregather,

once every year, for three summer days and nights, to celebrate the Romérage. At the time when there were still people living at Peyrouton, and the oldest among the pilgrims still remember them, they used to live in fear and fright of these three summer nights. They bolted their doors and barred their windows, and mothers forbade their children to venture outside while the ragged and tattered band, at times numbering several hundred, gathered outside, lit their innumerable lamps, and filled the night with their unending, strange, and horrifying songs. Now the inhabitants of Peyrouton have gone, and on three days each year the beggars take possession of the village. The smoke of their camp fires rises from amidst the white ruins in numberless little columns; the humming and buzzing of their odd, incomprehensible chatter weave in and out the crumbled walls, gaping doors and windows and hang like a buzzing cloud above the dead hamlet that has suddenly wakened to ghostly life.

No one knows exactly what this half-sacred, half-profane festival is and from what times it dates. Few among the pilgrims themselves understand the meaning of the words of their chants, for they are in a language that is no longer spoken even in the remoteness of Vargelonnes. But the beggars and tramps, the homeless wanderers all over the country, hundreds of miles away, all know them and sing them by the light of their lanterns among the trees when they foregather, once every year in the high summer, for three nights at the Chapel of St. Arluc.

The sun stood high. It was near the midday hour.

Old Boromé was sitting under a fig tree in the shade of an ivy-covered wall, cooking his soup in a battered and rusty, formerly blue enamel pan.

'Yes,' he said, stirring his pot with a fig branch stripped of its lower leaves, 'they passed at daybreak. The five of us had not long arrived, and we recognized the preacher. They passed through the wood, trying to avoid the village, but we saw them all the same. The boy was crying, and that made us suspicious. What is it all about?'

'Difficult to say,' answered Joannon. 'We're on our way to find out.'

Boromé went on stirring his soup. 'How many are you?'

'Four. Three men and a woman.'

'Leave the woman here. If you like I'll come with you. We'll soon find them. I sent several men after them already. Because it didn't look regular. Because I thought sooner or later you would come. At the edge of the wood you'll find Grand-Cigogne and one called Toupin as look-outs. Three others have followed them.'

'Who are they?'

'Canneton, Bastien, and Maurin. Naturally it's difficult to follow anyone across the plateau without being seen. You know the plateau?'

'In a way. I've never crossed it, though. What distance is it?'

'Peira-Colonna?' Boromé made a gesture with his fig branch that seemed to say: Any distance you like. Four hours. Four days. Years away. Perhaps not there at all. You know very well. Don't ask foolish questions. He whistled. 'Barbiche!'

Barbiche, who was behind the wall, put his head through the empty window space.

'Peira-Colonna,' asked Boromé. 'How many hours?'

Barbiche scratched his bearded chin. 'Three to four. With luck.'

'What do you mean, with luck?' demanded Joannon.

'Like I said, with luck,' repeated Barbiche. 'Unless you have the plateau against you. Then it's wicked. Then it's better to turn back. No good trying to force it if it doesn't go. That's why I say with luck.'

He withdrew his head, and Joannon heard him chop firewood behind the wall.

'All right,' he said to Boromé. 'We're going to have luck.'

'But leave the woman here,' said Boromé.

'No,' he answered. 'You don't understand. It's not the woman who's come with us men. It's us men who're accompanying the woman. So——'

Boromé nodded.

'I'll be seeing you,' he said. 'I'll be here when you come back.'

Joannon left him and went back to the others. They were resting among the high grass in the shadow of a tumble-down barn. Janine had taken off her shoes and stretched her bare feet in the grass. Archambault had fallen asleep.

'Well?' asked Godefroy.

'It's the way we figured it,' answered the woodsman. His voice suddenly sounded tired and rather irritated. It had grown very hot.

‘The boy. The preacher. And another man with a large bundle. That would be our Napoleone. We should eat now and sleep for a couple of hours. We don’t want to get there all tired out and exhausted. It’s four hours, with luck.’

He glanced at Janine. Instinctively, under his look, she nestled a little closer to Godefroy, who was sitting with his back leaning against the wall.

‘I said with luck,’ Joannon repeated, almost harshly.

Janine lowered her eyes but said nothing.

‘No need to be afraid,’ he added casually. He went round the corner and disappeared.

These two, thought Godefroy, now what is wrong with them?

He felt a little shiver of alarm creep up his back and bite him in the neck. He felt sleepy and dispirited. This voice of Joannon’s, it had made him feel quite discouraged. And Janine’s uneasiness, her sleepy irritation—ah yes, they’re at cross purposes, he reflected. They don’t know it themselves yet, but I know it because it makes me feel like a cold stone sitting between them. Me—I’m nothing in this. I’m not here at all. Or perhaps just here to see and feel that they don’t get on, these two. No more. They have no power over each other; that’s what is the matter. Janine not over Joannon. Joannon not over Janine. Nothing yields. They’re stuck.

‘Godefroy,’ said Janine, ‘tell me.’

‘Yes, *grappa?*’

‘Had I cared more for him, had I loved him more, do you think he would have stayed? That he would not have run away?’ She paused and brushed her hair back from her hot temples. ‘Because I never loved him. Until now.’

‘No,’ he answered, with his thoughts elsewhere. ‘It’s got nothing to do with it. He didn’t run away. He was fetched, stolen.’

How do I know he was, he thought. How do I know it’s got nothing to do with it? Who am I to know anything at all about what goes on in this country, in the hearts and minds of these men and women, of Janine and Joannon and the rest? Me—I just look and stare and understand nothing. That is the truth. I need not be here. And once they no longer want me I shall no longer be here. That is the truth too.

'Because I love him now,' Janine said with sudden bitter emphasis. 'You must understand. I love him.'

'Yes, I understand,' he answered, his mind empty but for buzzing, hurting sunlight.

'I want him back. I would give anything to get him back. Everything. I want all my children. All of them. Always. For ever.'

The midday heat hummed and drummed in his ears and danced before his eyes. It magnified all words and sounds until they made the irritated mind burst with trembling craziness. There was something rapacious and greedy in this craziness of the heat-created words and thoughts, and Godefroy grew afraid of it because he felt it might pounce on him, too, at any moment, as it rustled through the high grass, grabbing, clutching, gripping everything in a senseless urge of possession. He rose and went over to the haversack. He wished Joannon would come back and help him. All intimacy between Janine and him had gone of a sudden; it seemed burned out by the sun, and he felt like a mere shadow cast by the sun on the broken wall that would vanish with the dying light. He opened the haversack and took out the food.

'By this evening,' he said, his back turned to her, 'we shall know where we are.'

It is foolish of me to say that, he thought. Janine did not answer, and although he did not turn round he knew that she wasn't looking at him. She is right, he thought, since I'm not here. He gazed across towards the ruined houses which gleamed white in the quivering heat and at the pilgrims moving in and out, sitting, talking, sleeping in the grass under the trees, and he thought: I should take a piece of bread and a piece of cheese and go away. Simply go away.

Then he saw Joannon coming back.

He had been down to the stream and had brought a gourdful of water. He smiled at him, knowingly, confidently, it seemed to Godefroy, and he smiled back and handed him the bread and the cheese. Joannon took them and passed them on to Janine in the grass with a smile, and they woke Archambault, who sat up with a start, rubbing his eyes. They uncorked the bottle of red wine and mixed the wine with the cold, clear water Joannon had brought, and they passed the gourd round and drank from it thirstily, each in his turn.

'This is a queer place,' said Archambault, looking round. 'Very queer and very nice. I've slept well.'

Barbiche went with them to the edge of the wood.

'At dusk,' he said, pointing to a pile of soot-blackened stones in the grass, 'we shall make a fire here, and that should guide you back.'

'You'll have to make it a pretty big one,' said Joannon.

'You'll see it all right,' answered the pilgrim. 'Now keep straight on. All the time. Don't let yourselves be diverted by anything. Straight on. And good luck.'

Archambault pulled his watch from his pocket, looked at it, stared at the sun, and put the watch back. It showed half-past three.

The plateau was before them.

For a while a few isolated trees accompanied them, pointing the way: a tall, dusty poplar here and there, a couple of cypresses now and then, a lonely plane tree, the tattered umbrella of a pine tree sitting forlornly and companionless in the high grass. Then no more trees but broom.

Broom, nothing but broom. A scraggy, thorny, knee-deep sea of sombre and wicked brush through which little lanes and paths, hardly discernible, ran in a treacherous and disconcerting fashion in all directions. It was difficult to keep the direction, easy to lose the way. There was nothing, dead or alive, that pointed the route. Large and silent crows sprang up now and then a few yards before the wanderers, but the wind carried them off, hither and thither; if the eye followed them the foot lost its path.

But suddenly the broomland ceased, abruptly as if cut off by a knife, and the great solitude of the grass plain opened with breath-taking, suffocating unexpectedness. There was no comfort in turning and looking back. The forest of St. Arluc had long disappeared. The plateau stretched endlessly, evenly, in all directions, flat and featureless, without beginning or end. Grass, grass, grass. Tufts and tussocks of grass, mops and mats of grass, an endless expanse of grey-green and dust-coloured herbage, sharp-cutting blades, strewn with sharp-edged stones that made walking painful and difficult. The grey-green dustiness now and then interrupted by a yellow or brownish patch, like the stain of tobacco juice in an old man's beard, stretched as far

as the horizon and beyond; the dividing line between heaven and earth, between the sky and the grass had dissolved.

Again they walked in pairs for no particular reason, but automatically, without giving it any thought; only now it was Archambault who was in front with Janine, and Joannon and Godefroy following. It was curious to see the two walk beside each other, the short stocky figure of the blacksmith stumping along stubbornly, aided by his stick, and Janine taller, but she, too, bending slightly against the wind, her scarf fluttering, walking lightly, easily, to the rhythmical movements of her swinging arms.

'She walks as if she knew the way,' said Godefroy.

'Perhaps she knows it,' answered his companion.

'As if she'd been this way many times before.'

'Perhaps she has.' Joannon looked ahead, straight into the white heat of the blazing sun, without blinking. 'Some ways one goes hundreds of times. In one's dreams.'

No, thought Godefroy. I was not wrong. They're walking behind each other and yet in totally different directions.

Nothing showed on the horizon, absolutely nothing. Peira-Colonna? Godefroy wondered. What if it didn't exist at all? There was nothing except the wind. It blew incessantly, a hot, dry, steady breath across the plain, ruffling the grass, marching ahead of them, always ahead of them, driving its veil of grey-green dust on and on. Nothing except the wind.

Then the figure of a man rose from the grass and waved.

'That's Canneton,' said Joannon, his voice hoarse from the hot wind. 'At least we haven't lost our direction.'

They came up to him.

'Bastien and Maurin are ahead,' he said. 'They left me here to give you word. This is the way the three went. How long ago?' He grinned and looked at the sun. 'Couldn't say. Many hours. The boy was crying. He wouldn't walk any more. The preacher carried him on his shoulders.'

Joannon saw Janine swallow, but she said nothing.

They walked on. Far ahead of them a cloud seemed slowly to descend from the low, rigid sky and to seat itself on the grass. Now it rose again. There was a slit of light, a glimpse of sky now between

it and the grass. It rose a little more. Then it stopped, suspended a few handbreadths above the plain, and like that it began to come forward, steadily, step by step, against the wind.

All four of them saw it. They walked on, in spite of it, watching it all the time. The shadow came marching forward like a big beast. The grass seemed to flatten out where it trod; it walked on large and soundless feet.

Suddenly Janine stopped. Archambault walked a few steps farther, then he, too, halted. Janine stood facing the cloud, her legs slightly apart, her feet firmly planted in the grass, her arms akimbo. Like that she stood. The cloud advanced, silently, softly, steadily. It had almost reached her when Godefroy, all at once, felt a fierce gush of wind rush up from behind him. It was cold, and he felt it bite into his ears. He looked at Joannon and saw him, too, feeling for his ears. It was just one long and fierce blast; it had nothing to do with the steady, dry, hot breath that had drummed in their ears for the past hours. It made a curious noise. It clattered and clanged, rattled and stamped, and had passed them.

Ahead of them Janine stood, still in her strange posture. Now she lifted her head and looked at the cloud. Before her eyes the cloud suddenly broke asunder. The furious gush of cold wind seemed to fall over it and within seconds had torn it to shreds. Tattered wisps still floated in the air a few moments later and were carried away by the long, steady breath of the plateau. When Godefroy and Joannon had reached the two it was all over. Nothing remained except the stillness of the vast expanse of grassland.

The four looked at each other, panting and confused.

'As Barbiche said, with luck,' said Joannon, wiping his eyes. 'Unless we've got the plateau against us.'

'What was it?' asked Archambault.

'Horsemen,' answered Janine. Her cheeks were glowing in the red afternoon sun. 'Many of them. They came up from behind. Didn't they pass you?'

'Something passed,' Godefroy answered.

'Look,' she said and pointed to the ground.

The grassland all round them was torn up as if by a wild stampede. Tufts of grass were uprooted, raked up, and tattered mops of grass

strewn about, and the imprints of hooves and horseshoes clearly visible in the soft, ploughed-up sand.

'Let's go on,' said Joannon. 'The sun is already low.'

He no longer concealed his nervousness and irritation. He said no more, and as he didn't none of the others did. They walked on, and the plain did not seem to come to an end. The transparent border of the sky now seemed to weigh heavily on the grass on all sides. Janine alone among them appeared as fresh and undiscouraged as in the morning.

The same thing happened to them twice more before they reached Bastien and Maurin. Each time it was the same—the cloud descending and advancing against them, the furious cavalcade of icy wind and clattering noise storming up from behind, the unseen and invisible battle, and then silence and the devastated ground.

'Who understands any of this?' asked Archambault.

Joannon shrugged his shoulders but answered nothing.

'Me,' said the blacksmith, 'I say this: there is something against us. And there is also something that helps us. Something that wants to prevent us from getting through and something that clears the way each time. It's pretty clear. But don't ask me what it is.'

They didn't.

Bastien and Maurin, the two pilgrims, had appeared. They had hidden and waited for them among the ruins of a deserted little cowman's hut and emerged suddenly, on unexpectedly rising ground, from the glare of the swiftly approaching sunset. They had stepped out and were waving to indicate the direction. The four hastened towards them.

The plateau had changed its face. It was no longer flat and featureless as a table. Its flatness began to be broken here and there, as if the ground had at last awakened from its deadly rigidity; it stretched its limbs, heaved its breast and breathed with a rolling, swelling rhythm, and rose steadily towards a low ridge just ahead of them. The hard, dusty, knife-sharp grass had disappeared; the ground was softer, moist, and of a darker green. Broom and gorse, cistus and brier stood about in little patches, and trees had appeared again, a lonely larch, a solitary pair of alder trees, low-creeping juniper, and three poplars looking from the ridge towards the riotous sunset.

'You remember?' asked Godefroy.

'Yes, soldier,' answered Joannon. 'I remember the Pachoun.'

He lifted his head and sniffed the air that came floating towards them, cooler now, humid, and almost soothing.

'Now we've made it after all,' he said, 'the other part of our journey. I always knew we should have to do it one day.'

They climbed on towards the ridge where the two men were waiting.

'And your Janine, soldier, she knew it too. All along.'

Godefroy lowered his eyes. 'I'm not saying no, Joannon,' he answered.

The story of Bastien and Maurin was the same as Canneton's, with the difference that this time the Italian had been carrying the exhausted child instead of the priest.

'Serves him right,' murmured Archambault. 'The scoundrel.'

'How much farther?' asked Joannon.

'Turn round,' said Bastien. 'You're there.'

On yonder ridge, hardly more than a stone's throw away, stood Peira-Colonna.

It was a large black house amid a wide expanse of rich pasture land which it dominated with a distrustful mien. It had a short, stumpy watch-tower on its right wing and was surrounded by a number of smaller and lower buildings that looked equally sombre and lifeless—outhouses, stables and barns, coach houses, haylofts, huts, and sheds.

The main building was screened by a semicircle of high poplars; among these trees the house seemed to crouch like a large black animal ready to pounce on any intruder. There was an air of neglect or ruin—or was it incompleteness—about it which added to its unfriendliness as it stood there in the gathering dusk. It was either half in ruins or only half built; the watch-tower looked as if it had formerly been very much higher and its upper half had collapsed; the left wing ended abruptly in a half-crumbled or half-finished wall, and mounds of stones and rubble surrounded the place on all sides, overgrown with grass and huddling among the poplars and cypresses like the tombs of some long-forgotten ancestors.

'So it does exist, after all, Peira-Colonna,' said Janine.

There was a bewildering tone of awe and apprehension in her voice that made Joannon turn his eyes towards her.

'It does,' he answered, 'and it has still only half risen from its ruins.'

Archambault blew his nose between his thumb and forefinger and sniffed.

'It's a big place,' he said, 'as places go.'

Godefroy said nothing. Darkness was gathering fast over the strange and unfamiliar scene. He glanced at Janine, who stood a few steps away from him, but he could not see her face clearly. Shadows of wonderment and elated expectancy were playing over her features that had once been so familiar to him; they transfigured it now into something utterly remote, ungraspable, and filled with a different life to which he knew no approach. It suddenly seemed sadly absurd to him that she who stood there, gazing at the dusk-shrouded goal of their journey, should be bearing his child. It was difficult to believe; harder even to imagine that one day, some months hence, this child would be born; unimaginable, in fact, that their life together, or any part of it as he had known it, would go on beyond this present tense and unbearably unreal moment.

'Well?' he asked with an unsure voice, and was almost surprised when Joannon answered.

'We're going,' he said. 'It's dark enough now.'

Bastien and Maurin, who stayed behind, watched the four disappear into the folds of dusk.

16

A STABLE LANTERN had been lit above the porch of Peira-Colonna. It cast a swaying, greenish light over a profusion of ivy, clematis, and dog roses which framed the entrance to the big house. Here and there lights appeared in the windows and went out again.

'If one knew how many they are in the place,' murmured Joannon.

A vast odour of cattle floated above the pasture land. It was thick and sticky and clung to one's face and hands.

Approaching softly and without talking, the four crossed a ditch and climbed through a barbed-wire fence. Then across a patch of old and disused grazing ground where in places the grass was worn off down to the naked, stony soil. Another wire enclosure and a rather richer pasture. Another ditch, wider than the previous one, and half filled with stagnant water, and beyond it a meadow. Judging from the strong smell that streamed forth from it, it was inhabited. The bulls rose to their feet at the approach of the men, stamping the dull ground and shaking their dewlaps. Joannon whistled softly. The animals settled down again.

All the time the greenish light of the lantern had remained before their eyes. Now they were no more than a few yards away from it. In front of them rose a low, thick wall.

'Halt!' said a muffled voice.

A hat, a face, the muzzle of a rifle showed above the wall. But before their owner was able to utter or do anything further Joannon had leaped over the wall. There was the dull sound of a heavy fall in the grass, and hat, face, and rifle disappeared. Archambault now scrambled across. Godefroy and Janine waited.

'Look at him,' they heard Joannon whisper.

'Of all people!' exclaimed the blacksmith. 'The preacher!'

With a furious grunt he threw himself upon his victim, obviously determined to strangle him on the spot.

'Preacher, indeed!' he growled. 'A cowherd—that's what he is—a filthy, stinking piece of a cowherd. Look at his clothes, the black jerkin with the silver N, exactly as you said; isn't it lovely, eh? And where's your cassock, my friend, and your rosary and your breviary? A cowherd's hat and a shotgun, that's what we're wearing now in the service of the Lord, eh? Kidnapper of little boys, scoundrel and liar, deceiver of innocent people, you cheat and thief, you— Ah,' he gasped, out of breath, 'I don't know any more words. But I think I'm going to kill you anyway, here and now. With my own hands I'm going to——'

'Sh-sh,' whispered Joannon. 'Leave him. We've got to ask him a few things.'

Janine and Godefroy had joined the others beyond the wall. In the darkness they saw the outlines of what was undoubtedly Father Pérégrin, prostrate in the high grass, with the furious blacksmith kneeling on him. It was clear why Father Pérégrin had so far not uttered a single word. Joannon had bound and gagged him. He now removed the handkerchief from the fettered man's mouth.

'Where's the boy?' he asked.

'Ah, that boy!' groaned the miserable false divine. 'The curse of a little devil he is, that boy! The trouble he's given me! Three times he's tried to run away since we arrived.'

'Where is the boy?' Joannon repeated his question. 'Answer.'

'In the watch-tower,' moaned the preacher. 'That's where they put him because he tries to escape all the time. Right up in the watch-tower; that's where he is.'

'How does one get there?'

With much groaning and moaning, and with the blacksmith sitting all the time on his chest, the preacher described the way. Joannon nodded. Then he ordered Archambault to gag him again and took the bound man's shotgun.

'But——' protested Archambault.

'Sh-sh,' Joannon answered. 'Don't make so much noise. We're not going to kill him just yet. First we'll see whether he's spoken the truth. If he's lied there's still time—do you hear, preacher?' The bristly snout of the helpless cowherd emitted a furious hiss from the damp grass. It was clear that he had understood very well. 'Let's be off,' whispered Joannon. 'We'll see you on our way back.'

It had grown completely dark. The stone wall was behind them. Only a small cluster of young larches, almost opposite the porch, now hid them from the house. A light had appeared in the left wing behind the windows of the ground floor; it moved about and finally settled down: an oil lamp had been placed on the table. Now there were steps here and there among the dark buildings; a stable door slammed; a ladder creaked; heavy boots were walking across the muddy courtyard. In a ditch somewhere on the right the frogs began to croak, at first sporadically and out of tune, but soon in powerful unison and keeping good time. In the grass and in the invisible shrubs

and bushes, under the trees and in the ivy of the house wall, the insects of the night began their many-voiced chant. A mould-coloured and poisonous-looking moon was rising behind the ridge.

'Wait,' whispered Joannon. 'Stay where you are.'

The next moment he had disappeared in the darkness and was gone for several minutes. Then as suddenly and as noiselessly as he had vanished he reappeared. His face was calm; he looked almost absent-minded. But Godefroy saw that the green starlight shone in his eyes. He had made his plan, his decision.

'They're all there,' he said. 'It's the hour of the soup.'

He spoke with a soft voice and very rapidly.

'They're all sitting round a long table in there, eighteen of them all men.'

'Le Noir?' asked Janine.

The woodsman ignored the question.

'One seat is empty,' he said. 'That would be the preacher's. It won't be long before they get suspicious and wonder why he isn't turning up. So before they begin looking for him we must be off and gone. With the boy. Or—he cast a long, silent glance at Janine—'or we shan't get out of here with our lives.'

He turned brusquely towards the woman and looked at her again. Now he was standing very close to her. The green light flickered fiercely in his eyes.

'Don't speak, Janine,' he said. 'We haven't got the time.'

There was an almost frightening eeriness in his voice that made Godefroy and Archambault shudder despite the sultriness of the night. Thus, thought Godefroy, speaks not man, but the wood. Thus speaks the tree, and he wondered how so frightening a thought could come to him.

'I know,' said Joannon, 'why you came with us and what it is you want here. I've seen it grow on your face all to-day, and you've tried to force it upon us. But I'm telling you—no. The patron's already said it. This thing doesn't concern you alone. It concerns all of us. Only this morning it was a very different thing from what it is to-night. And it's not our fault. There. Quick now.'

He turned his back. Godefroy was staring fixedly at Janine. He noticed how she trembled. He saw her opening her lips, trying to say

something, with great defiance shining from her eyes, and suddenly giving it up. She remained silent. Her lips quivered a little, then closed. He's won, he thought. The tree has won.

'Grappa,' he whispered. But she did not even look at him.

'Archambault,' murmured Joannon, 'you stand by at the watch-tower. Just beneath the window. Soldier, you come with me. Janine, you stay right here, under the trees, and watch the porch. That way we may pull it off.'

They turned to go. The blacksmith had already disappeared in the darkness. Once more Godefroy turned and looked at Janine.

'Grappa,' he whispered.

Then he saw that she was crying. Tears were streaming down her face as she stood there under the young larch trees in the poisonous moonlight.

'Godefroy!' Her voice faltered and then broke. 'I'm frightened. Godefroy—I'm frightened.'

'Soldier!' called Joannon from the darkness. 'Quick!'

'I'm coming,' he whispered.

But he was not sure whose call he had answered.

They passed swiftly round the house, beneath the lighted windows, to the rear of the main building. Godefroy did not look inside. He heard the voices of men, the clatter of plates, and caught a fleeting smell of food and sour wine. They reached the back entrance. A small, smoking oil lamp stood on the ledge beside the door. Hundreds of moths and night flutterers of all sizes circled round it and darted in and out of the thick clematis.

They entered the hall. It was dark and smelled of men and cattle, of greased leather, mud, and dung-encrusted boots, of spilled wine, dirty clothes, and cold tobacco smoke. The hall was large. It seemed to traverse the entire width of the main house. At the far end, straight ahead of them, the two men caught a glimpse of pale, oddly streaked light. It was the moon falling through the bead-string curtain of the porch. On their left the passage seemed to lead to the room where the men were having their meal. The two companions could hear the muffled, indistinct sound of their voices behind a closed door far away. On their right a broad staircase swung upwards to the first

floor. The whole place seemed buried in darkness and silence but for the unreal rumble of voices far away behind the door.

Godefroy felt Joannon's hand on his shoulder. He turned. He saw the light of his eyes.

'And you, my companion?' he asked softly. 'You, too, are you out to murder anyone to-night?'

Was he laughing, smiling, mocking him? Godefroy did not know.

'No,' he answered. 'No one.'

'Then I can go,' said the shantyman. He gave him his rifle. 'There. It hinders me. Stay here at the foot of the stairs and watch while I go up. So far the preacher has not lied. I'll find him. I shan't come back the same way. So directly you hear me whistle from outside you rush straight along, as fast as you can, through the bead-string curtain and out to where we left your Janine, under the larch trees. Until then let no one go up the stairs. Whoever it is, stop him. But quietly, soldier, silently; you know how. Don't fire.'

Joannon's voice had become almost inaudible.

'Don't kill anyone,' he whispered. 'Don't kill anyone, soldier. There. So long, comrade. I'll be seeing you.'

His hand slid down the soldier's sleeve, touching it lightly, almost caressingly, and was gone.

'Good luck, Joannon,' breathed Godefroy.

But there was no answer.

Now the great house around him lay in stillness and utter darkness. Nothing breathed. Nothing stirred. Even the distant murmur of the men behind the door seemed to have died away. Outside the moths fluttered round the oil lamp.

Godefroy stood leaning against the banister, watching and waiting. Hours seemed to pass while he stood watching the bead-string curtain at the far end of the hall. The moon was rising steadily; the strings of the curtain now stood out clearly and distinctly against its green, mouldy light. Years seemed to come and go in slow, silent succession. They entered the house through the curtain; they came wandering down the hall and, passing him, left it again by the back door, one by one, without sound or smell. Now and then a slight breath of wind

brushed through the curtain and the bead strings gave a small wooden sound. Then again silence.

And the curious thing is, thought the soldier Godefroy, that all this is not happening now. It happened years ago, and I remember it very well because it was in the war. The frogs were croaking in the ditches all around the farm-house by the river, and I stood guarding the staircase that led to the upper story and I had two rifles, one slung over my back, the other in my hand, and upstairs, barricaded in a room, were the traitors. One would hear nothing for a long time, nothing at all, and the moon would rise above the hillside, and the frogs would croak, and suddenly there would be some firing overhead, and steps and the sound of a door smashed in, and all the time the frogs would go on croaking, undisturbed, and the cicadas chirping in the fig trees, and then some one would come down the stairs. That's how it happened, and I can almost remember the name of the place, almost.

The breeze brushed through the bead-string curtains, and a little wooden clatter came running down the hall, like a mouse on wooden feet. Or was it the steps of a man? Some one, the soldier felt, was walking about. But was he coming? Was he going? Some one was walking about in the thin, airy darkness. Twice he had already passed him, had almost touched him, and was gone again. Now, somewhere far away in the distance, a door opened and, a moment later, closed again. Now the steps were approaching once more and came steadily nearer until the wanderer was almost upon him. Then they swerved off. Ah, thought the soldier, he's turned the corner and is going down towards the porch. In a moment or two I shall see him. The far end of the hall is light with the moon and the reflection of the lantern above the porch. I shall see his outline when he reaches the curtain. Steadily the steps went away towards the porch, but he saw nothing. The bead strings clattered a little. The next moment the wanderer was before him at the foot of the stairs.

He could not see him. The darkness was very thin. It was airy and almost translucent. Yet he could not see him. But he felt him. He felt his face only a handbreadth away from his own. He stood astride the landing. His right hand held the banister. His left hand held the rifle by its muzzle. He barred the way.

The wanderer touched his face, his sleeve, and walked right through him. Behind his back he walked up the stairs.
Outside croaked the frogs.

Joannon had found his way.

Slipping down the passage of the upper floor, keeping to the left wall, he had reached the corner and found the entrance to the tower. A staircase led up, narrow and winding. A door on each landing. Pass the first three doors. The fourth is it. There should be a key in the lock, outside. There was. For a moment Joannon stood and listened, his ear pressed to the door. He was not sure whether he heard anything inside or not. For a moment it sounded like soft sobbing or crying, but the next moment again there was nothing.

Carefully he turned the key and pressed down the handle. The door opened. He slipped inside and closed it behind him.

'Hey,' he whispered. 'Rémy.'

The room was small and bright with moonlight which streamed through a square, low window. The boy was sitting on the floor, quiet and unconcerned. When he heard his name he turned his head and lifted his eyes. He smiled.

'Oh, Joannon,' he said without surprise. 'Is it you?'

'Yes,' whispered the woodsman. 'We've come to get you out of here. Come on, get up quickly. Make no noise. We're in a hurry.'

The boy nodded and rose.

'This is an awful place, Joannon,' he said. 'I don't like it. Where's my mamma?'

'She's down below, waiting for you.'

'And the soldier too?'

'The soldier too. And Archambault. Come on now.'

'Good,' answered Rémy. 'They locked me up in here, you know. The big man with the black beard who says he's my father.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'I know he isn't,' he said contemptuously. 'I know now. It's all a big lie. But he's locked me up here because I tried to run away. He thinks I can't get out because it's so high up. But I've made myself a rope. Look. It's nearly finished. Do you think it's a good rope?'

'It's a very good rope,' answered Joannon in amazement.

It was. There was an iron bedstead in the corner of the room, and the boy had stripped it of its blanket and sheets. Calmly and systematically he had, with the help of his pocket-knife, torn and cut it all into strips of equal width, including the curtains which he had pulled down, and tied all the strips together.

'I haven't done the knots very well,' he explained. 'You'd better do them again. Have you anything to eat? I'm hungry.'

Joannon had already started in great haste to secure the knots and tie them tightly. Now he felt for his pockets.

'Here,' he whispered. 'An apple. It's all I've got. Make haste now. The window. And don't talk, eh?'

Rémy nodded. He was completely unperturbed and not in the least excited. He watched Joannon, quietly chewing his apple. The woodsman leaned out of the window. It wasn't high. Twenty-five feet at the most. He looked round over the moonlit scene. Archambault was there at the foot of the tower. Over yonder, to the left, was the little cluster of larch trees. He couldn't see Janine, but on the height of the ridge opposite he recognized clearly the shadow of the hut where Bastien and Maurin were waiting. And far away, endlessly far away in the distance, he saw a faint gleam of light. A fire. Barbiche's fire.

He felt quiet in his heart, calm and reassured. There was stillness all round. They had one more minute or two before they would be detected. Time enough. He would succeed.

He fastened one end of the rope to the hinge of the window and secured it with a double knot. The other end he tied round the boy's waist. Then he bent over the window again.

'Ho, Archambault!'

'Ho,' answered a muffled voice.

'Here comes!'

'And where do we go?'

'Up to the hut as fast as you can, all three of you. Hide there and wait for us. We shan't be long. Attention!'

He lifted the boy over the window sill and slowly lowered him down.

'Got him?'

'Got him.'

Another moment or two and the rope hung loosely again and without weight. Once more Joannon leaned out. Stillness. Neither shadows

nor voices. He waited for Archambault and the child to come forward from the wall. Nothing stirred. Where were they? Had they already run across to the larches? Were they already gone? So fast? Joannon saw them nowhere. A slight breeze had risen. It came fresh and cooling from the plateau and played mockingly round the sultry house, making the high tops of the poplars in front of the window rustle and sway.

For an anxious second Joannon kept his eyes fastened on the larches over yonder. Did nothing stir? The larches stood peacefully bathed in silver-greenish moonlight.

Now a shadow emerged from the cluster of trees.

It made a couple of hesitant steps over the grass towards the porch, then a third, and halted.

Joannon recognized it. It was Janine.

The bead strings of the curtain rattled softly in the wind and then parted in the middle. A second later they dropped back with a slight rustle and closed again.

Janine, under the larch trees, felt it must be he. She raised her eyes. Now she was almost certain that she saw him, in the clear light of the moon and the lamp above the porch, on the doorstep of his house. He was as she remembered him; he had changed little. He was still a young man, tall, broad-shouldered, and strong, like a pirate. He wore a white shirt which gleamed in the moonlight above his black trousers and black high boots and no coat, and his white shirt sleeves were rolled up his tanned, hairy arms to his elbows. Thus she had remembered him, with his black Arab beard and the strangely curved wide-brimmed hat that cast a shadow over his face. It was he.

He stood on his porch and looked round, searching, with a wide sweep of his eyes, the dark land before him.

Janine, he then called. Are you there?

It was his voice. She remembered it. She had preserved its tone inside her all the time. She had never forgotten it. The cruel music of the large forest in the wilderness when the autumn storm plays the great organ of the woods. Great boulders rolling and rumbling from mountain heights down a dry, waterless river bed. The crashing and splintering of storm-broken trees. Water bursting through a

suddenly opened weir. It ran down her body inside her clothes, and her skin felt stung and aflame in all its pores, and it made the unborn child in her womb whimper with pain and loneliness. It couldn't be that she imagined it all.

Yes, she answered from among the larch trees. I'm here.

She rose and advanced two steps across the grass towards where she saw him standing on the porch, and she saw her own shadow go before her until it reached the porch, and she made one more step and then halted.

So you've come after all, he said. It has taken me a long time, seven years, to make you come, but in the end you've come. As I told you you would. Why don't you step nearer, Janine, into the light, so I can see you after all these years? You're still beautiful; and you haven't changed since that hot summer day at Barquemou seven years ago; you're the same.

Yes, she answered softly. I am the same.

Step nearer then, he said. Why don't you smile?

He crossed his bare forearms on his chest and looked at her from under his wide hat, from black, shimmering eyes under black, bushy eyebrows in a dark, tanned face, and while he looked time seemed to flow endlessly between them.

I know, he said at length, why you aren't smiling, Janine. Because you've come to murder me. Haven't you?

Yes. She nodded. I have. But——

But you know that you will not do it, neither to-night nor ever, and you feel ashamed for the foolishness of your heart. Once before, Janine, you tried to take my life, at Barquemou, because your heart was bursting with love in your body and you thought it would spare you the road to Peira-Colonna. But it didn't, and you merely disfigured my face and left a deep scar across my cheek which reminds us of Barquemou, you and me, and of the time of our promise. Look, here it is. I've still got it.

His hand pushed back slightly the wide brim of his hat, and in the pale, sickly moonlight she saw the scar that ran like a red-hot curling flame across his cheek.

Yes, she answered with a halting voice. Will it never go away?

He shook his head. A twelvemonth ago, Janine, you had already

come most of the way, and there was but a day's journey between us. Then you tried to kill me for the second time, not with a grape-picker's knife this time, but by burying your longing heart and your weeping soul in the folds of a wayward stranger's mantle. There, you thought, they could hide so that you would forget where they were and I would not know where to search for them. But I found them, Janine, and you had not forgotten them, and you knew that you would have to make that one more day's journey. Do you remember?

Yes, she answered. I remember.

And this morning, he said, you set out for the third time to take my life. You set out to take back from me what you thought I had taken from you. The pawn and the prize. Your life. Seven years. The past. The present. The future. All these, Janine, by whose names you called only one thing. Your love and your longing. And when you arrived you saw that I had not taken them. When you arrived, at last, you saw that I had nothing that wasn't mine by right because you had given it to me, in the seven long years in which you loved me. Is it the truth, Janine?

Yes, she whispered. It is the truth.

He unfolded his arms and stretched them out towards her.

Then smile, Janine, he said. Send away those three clumsy men who are being a nuisance about my house. They don't know what all this is about. Tell them to go home before they do something foolish and come to grief. Look. The stranger who believes he possesses your heart, in truth he possesses nothing, not even himself. Because I have him here enclosed in my hand.

He held out his right hand, and in its palm she saw something small and metallic that shone brightly in the light of the lantern.

That is all there is of him, Janine. A small bit of metal, no more. I hold him here in my hand, his past and his future, and I can do with him as I please. It is for you to decide. Enter Peira-Colonna with a smile and I shall set him free. I shall throw away this little thing into the high grass or into the ditch over yonder, and none will any longer know of him or follow his trail. Whether you smile or not, Janine, you will not see him again. But smile and I shall release him.

She stared at him. Before her eyes the flickering lamp swayed to

and fro. She tried to open her lips to smile, to speak she knew not what, but they were sealed and would not part.

Smile, Janine, he urged. You have arrived. You have come home. See the great house I have built for your love and your happiness on the ruins of my ancestors' stronghold. It is a good house. See how it stands amid great riches and untold wealth. There will be light in all its hundred windows. There will be music, laughter—smile, Janine, smile!

His voice thundered in her ears like the roar of the clamouring sea, like the bellowing of the outraged forest. She pressed her palms to her eyes to shield them from the enormous shadow which was now advancing towards her from the porch.

'Go away!' she cried. 'Go away!'

But the shadow would not halt. It pressed her in its arms. She closed her lips against it, but the shadow bit them until they bled and opened them with its teeth, and the flames of hell poured down her throat and choked her.

Smile, whispered the shadow. Smile, Janine, smile.

'Godefroy!' she cried 'Godefroy! I'm not betraying you! Godefroy! I'm not—Godefroy!'

Then some one brutally clapped his hand over her mouth and pulled her away.

'Quiet!' Archambault hissed. 'Are you mad? What are you screaming about? There's no one here, absolutely no one! Ah, merciful God, the woman's out of her mind! She's imagining things! She's seeing ghosts! Quiet, I say!'

Joannon, up in his window, had heard the cries. Only a second or two, it seemed to him, had elapsed between the moment he had seen the girl emerge from the larches and the fearful, demented yells.

What was happening?

He did not understand. The next moment lights appeared everywhere; voices came from all directions. Not only Janine's voice, madly, senselessly desperate. But also Archambault's voice, cursing, swearing, calling for the boy. And Godefroy's voice calling his own, Joannon's, name. And the voices of the cowherds here, there, and everywhere among the barns and stables, trying to find the intruders.

What on earth had happened?

Now someone whistled in long and continuous blasts. Now shots fell and swished past his window. The courtyard to the left was alive with lights, with running and stumbling boots, with shouts and whistling. On the grazing grounds beyond the stone wall the cattle began to rise and to move towards the house, frightened and curious. Over it all shone the mildewy moon, and far away in the distance gleamed, like a small red dot on the black horizon, the fire of Barbiche.

With a jerk Joannon turned round. The door had opened behind him. A light had come into the room.

'Don't move,' said a voice. 'Where's the boy?'

Joannon gave no answer.

He looked fixedly at the man who stood in the door holding a stable lantern, and all the time while he looked the rustling and murmuring of the poplars before the window were in his ears. He had never seen the man before. But he knew who he was. He knew him by his gleaming white shirt with its rolled-up sleeves. By his high black boots and black leather trousers. By his dark, tanned face, his strange, outlandish beard, and the broad scar that ran across his face like a red-hot flame. He knew him.

The man, too, seemed to recognize him. A curious, almost friendly flicker passed across his eyes. He seemed to smile.

'The star-eyed one!' he said.

His deep, rolling voice seemed to Joannon like thunder coming from the womb of the earth.

'The son of the forest. The lizard. The silent, soft-footed son-in-law of Rousset Barthélemy who returned to Roquefort!'

Still Joannon replied nothing. Slowly he receded towards the window, step by step. He knew that his face was calm; that there was even a smile on it, a breathless, aching smile that spread waves of pain through his whole body. He felt the low window sill in his back, and now the murmur of the poplars was louder in his ears than ever before.

'So the descendants of the Barthélemys have again come upon Peira-Colonna,' said the man, 'to take revenge and reduce it and lay it in dust and ashes. Have you forgotten your burning fields, your vineyards on fire?'

Again Joannon made no reply. But his right hand groped for his knife and its leather sheath. 'And will you be taking your knife too?'

he heard a voice speak into his ear among the whisper of the great poplars. 'Your long hunting knife?' 'Yes,' he answered, 'my long knife too.'

'Have you forgotten that Peira-Colonna always rises again? Greater, mightier than before! Always and always!'

Now the man was upon him. Joannon waited no longer.

With a swift move he pulled his knife from its sheath and leaped towards him, meaning to cut and hew for himself a passage to the door. But the man caught him in his jump. His left hand gripped the wrist of Joannon's right hand that held the knife. His right, an enormous paw, lay tightly round the woodsman's throat. Thus he pushed him back to the window, step by step, and forced him backwards over the ledge.

The lamp had fallen to the floor and gone out. The moon stood bright, like a white sheet in the square of the window. Joannon felt it trickle over his burning face, milkily, soothingly, as his head bent back. Now at last the choking grip vanished from his throat. Sweet, cool air swam across his cheeks as he fell from the window amid the murmuring poplars.

He had fallen on his face. He tried to roll over on his back and to look at the sky. For the sky had turned a flaming red. Huge clouds of smoke were trailing past the moon. Sparks were flying, and all of a sudden the air was filled with the neighing and whinnying of a hundred horses that stormed towards Peira-Colonna across the skies of Vargelonnes.

Had the Rider on the Clouds arrived? Was Peira-Colonna on fire?

The shantyman smiled. He let himself sink back.

Now a voice was calling his name. It came from very far, from the depth of the great forest, and it sailed towards him on motionless wings, like the wood pigeon that glides towards the valley from the top of the giant fir, cooing as it sails: 'Joannon! Joannon! Joannon!'

'I'm coming,' he whispered.

The great green starlight faded. He closed his eyes. With a soft little moan he died.

'Why are they so long in coming back?' asked Bastien, the pilgrim. 'It doesn't seem to go over yonder. Come on. Let's run across.'

'And what passes overhead?' asked Maurin. 'Is it a storm? One would say a whole army was riding across the sky. One can hear the horses.'

'There. A man has fallen from a window on the right.'

'Where?'

'Among the poplars. Look. The sky is turning red. It's full of sparks.'

'Let's run. Quick!' shouted Bastien.

They slid down the ridge and galloped across fences, wires, and ditches towards the house. Bastien was the faster runner, and Maurin had trouble in keeping pace with him. All round them the night was in uproar. The cattle roared in the darkness. They were frightened out of their wits by the noise and confusion and had begun to career across the dark meadows in all directions, chasing and pursuing everything and every one who moved in the moonlight. And overhead, in the reddened sky, the big cavalcade went on.

Near the wall the pilgrims ran into two figures who were hastening up towards the hut.

'Ho, Bastien!' cried Archambault. 'Is it you? Have you seen the boy? We've lost him, the devil!'

He was holding Janine by her wrist, dragging her along with him. The woman did not look up. She was weeping silently and incessantly.

'Oh, *misericordia*, my poor life!' groaned the blacksmith. 'Where's that filthy little boy? I had him here only a moment ago. Why, damnation, has he run away? And what on earth am I to do with her?'

'What's the matter with her?' asked Maurin, helping the crying woman over the wall.

'Out of her mind!' growled Archambault. 'That's what she must be. Perhaps got frightened or something. Suddenly she starts screaming like mad. For no reason at all. There was no one there, no one and nothing. Must have been seeing things. And of course that set the whole damned hellish place going. Now they're after us.'

'Where are the others?'

'Don't know. I lost them. Oh, curse and malediction. Now she cries, of course. As if that were any help.'

'But a man dropped from a window,' stammered Bastien. 'Over there by the poplars. We've both seen it.'

Archambault felt how his shrivelled old face suddenly froze.

'Window?' he stuttered. 'Poplars? For the mercy of God—run along, you two fellows; see what's happened and if it's— Oh, hurry, try to get him up to the hut if it's—'

The pilgrims had already raced off. Their tall, skinny shadows hopped across the grass and vanished. Archambault, behind the wall, still stood staring, trembling, unable to move.

'Oh, my God!' he murmured. 'Oh, my God. Oh, my God. And now they've set the house on fire!'

He had quite forgotten the woman by his side. But Janine did not move. She cried, silently and senselessly, without looking up.

Peira-Colonna was well alight at all its four corners as the soldier, blinded by smoke and heat, his face and hands bleeding, erred through the burning house.

'Janine!' he called. 'Janine! Where are you? Answer! Janine!'

There was no answer from the maddening turmoil around him. But had she not called him only a moment ago, called his name, a long, desperate cry for help? 'Godefroy! Godefroy!' And now again: 'Godefroy!' He had not dreamed it. He had heard it. It was still in his ear. He had rushed out to the porch. For had not some one whistled a long and continuous blast? Joannon. Where was he? At the larch trees he had found no one. He had hurried to the right. Then to the left. No one. And still it whistled. And still that long desperate cry was in his ear. 'Godefroy! Godefroy!' And now the firing had started. The shouting and running. The cattle were loose on the pastures. The horses were riding past the moon, neighing and whinnying, their manes fluttering like long straggling clouds past the mildewy, poisonous light of this night. He plunged back into the house.

'Janine!' he called. '*Grappa!* Where are you? Where are you?'

'Godefroy!' it sounded back to him, from farther away now, from outside. 'Godefroy! Godefroy!' The call came from all sides. From the right and the left. From below, from deep down in the earth, from the sky, and with the flaming wind it called from the plateau of Vargelonnes. 'Godefroy! Godefroy!'

It grew weaker and weaker. He hastened out once more. He stood on the porch. He heard it no more.

Overhead the furious battle went on. Who was struggling with whom over the mastery of Peira-Colonna, the cursed house? He did not know. He saw no one except a few cowherds here and there, rushing around, trying to stop the ravaging fire.

'Janine!' he called once more. But he felt that he had no voice left. 'Janine—where—are—you?'

It was no use. He was merely murmuring. No one could hear him. They had all gone. He was alone.

Suddenly a sound struck his ear.

'Ho, you!' a voice called. 'Are you the other one? The one they call the soldier?'

'Yes!' he answered. 'Who's calling?'

'Bastien. Your comrade, the son of the forest, he's dead.'

'Joannon?'

'Yes, Joannon. Where are you? I can't see you. Are you in there, in the fire? He was pushed out of the window. Over there among the poplars. And he fell into his own knife. Do you hear me?'

'I hear you, pilgrim. Who did it?'

'We don't know. Here we bring him, Maurin and myself.'

But I know, thought the soldier Godefroy. I know.

He gazed out into the fog and smoke-filled night. Over there by the larches two lanky figures were passing, carrying a third man on their shoulders. How quiet it had grown. The din of battle had abated. The skies were still in uproar, but the great turmoil was receding, away, it seemed, towards the plateau of Vargelonnes, towards the mountains, the forest. Towards the river, the plain, and Roquefort. The battle of Peira-Colonna was over. The great house was still burning, but it was now slowly burning to death. How far away they are, thought the soldier, the two pilgrims carrying the slain man. And how far away the larches are, the ridge and the cypresses by the hut. Now they are no more than tiny figures on the horizon, moving slowly, with lowered heads, through the grey, wafting mist. And the moon, that mouldy, poisonous thing, was it never going to sink? Was it for ever going to hang up there, casting its evil, sickening light, steadily, unmoved, unperturbed in its wickedness?

'I know who did it,' murmured the soldier as he turned and walked back into the smouldering house. 'I know. The man who went upstairs. The man who came towards me when I stood barring the stairs and walked right through me and upstairs. He did it, and it is my fault. Because I should have stopped him and didn't.

'But I shall stop him yet,' he murmured to himself as he trod along, past smouldering walls and charred beams, through clouds of drifting, biting smoke towards where he knew must be the staircase.

It was still there, broad and untouched by the fire, dark and breathing a musty smell of dust and greased leather, of mud-encrusted boots and spilled sour wine. The little oil lamp too, it was still there, and the moths and night flutterers still dancing in and out of the clematis. How curious, thought the soldier; have I not been away? I can't have been, for here, too, is my rifle, still leaning against the banister.

He took it up, and at that moment there were steps on the stairs. I have come just in time, thought the soldier. How fortunate. Resting his back against the banister, he watched the stairs, calmly and unhurriedly, holding his shotgun on his knee. When the tall black man in the white shirt and with the black, pointed beard had come halfway down, the soldier, leisurely and with a smile, pulled the trigger.

He saw the tall, giant figure stagger, sway, and then turn over down the stairs. And as it fell the staircase, the walls, the roof of the smouldering house seemed to fall with it. Myriads of sparks shot up before Godefroy's eyes and settled down again like a hot, burning shower of luminous rain.

Then it grew dark.

When he woke many hours later dawn was breaking and grey, damp autumn mist was floating among the burned-out ruins. He freed himself from the rubble and charred beams under which he had lain buried and slowly and painfully staggered to his feet. I have hurt my right shoulder, he thought; perhaps I have broken it. Ah, I must be on my way. The others will be waiting for me up at the hut, or perhaps they've already gone on. It is already morning. I wonder whether Barbiche's little fire is still burning to guide me on my way home. Oh yes, I think I can still make it; it's under four hours, isn't it? And after all, it's only my shoulder that hurts. My feet are all right.

I shall wash in the stream over yonder by the broken wall and then I shall feel better. Oh yes, I think I can make it. Don't wait for me. I'll be along. I'll find my way home all right. I shan't be long.

He had reached the ridge and now straightened himself. A great black bull who had fled up here from the madness of the night stared at him uncomprehendingly as he staggered across the endless plateau through the brewing mist of dawn and towards the rising sun.

17

AT ROQUEFORT, IN the middle of the night, the church bell was ringing furiously. It woke Rousset Barthélemy from a hot and sultry dream, and he jumped from his bed and put his head out of the window.

'Ho !' he cried, still drunk with sleep. 'What's the idea?'

Below, in the empty square, stood a lonely figure, barefooted and clad only in his trousers and shirt, gesticulating excitedly up to the windows.

'Is that you, Fabri? Have you been ringing the bell?'

'Yes, patron !' answered the Keeper of the Horses. 'Look what's happened ! All the horses are loose and have gone off !'

'Your horses? Are you crazy !'

'Not mine, patron !' Fabri explained. 'The horses in the citadel. A hundred of them or more. All off ! What a thing to happen ! They made such a noise in there that it woke me. And before I could get there they were already storming out, and riders on them, too, scores of them, all off in a mad gallop across the square and round the corner and down the Bourgade and then up into the air and—and—well, off across the sky !'

'Oh, shut up, you and your fancy horses in the citadel !' Rousset shouted back. 'Go back to sleep. What an idea !'

Other citizens were roused by now. Faces, angry and excited, appeared in windows ; doors were opened, and scantily dressed figures stepped out. A small group of men had collected round Fabri.

'Ho, Fortescue!' called Rousset. 'Is that you? For God's sake—tell that fool to go back to bed. He's seeing horses again!'

'But look, you stupid man!' cried Fabri, quite forgetting himself in his persistence. 'Look. The doors of the citadel are flung wide open. Can't you see?'

'It's true,' confirmed Fortescue from below.

'Oh, hang yourselves! Wait, I'm coming down!'

In the dark room he fished for his clothes and pulled them on.

'What is the matter, Rousset?' asked La Mère from her bed.

'Nothing,' he murmured. 'Fabri's making a disturbance. I'll be back in a moment.'

'Give me a drink of water, Rousset, before you go. You know, the jug is by the window. Just a drop. It's so hot.'

'Aren't you feeling well?' he inquired anxiously.

She smiled up at him from large sunken eyes and nodded faintly.

'It's this heat. And that moon. I wonder what's the matter with it? What a horrible, ghastly light. It makes one sick looking at it.' She turned her head to the side. 'Don't be long, Rousset.'

Down below they were waiting for him. There was light at the inn, too, and presently Madame Rose, complete with nightgown, moustache, and fantastic *chevelure*, appeared in the door.

The citadel stood open. There was no doubt.

From its dark inside streamed the strong odour of horses and horse dung. Bits of straw and hay were strewn about as far as the ramp and the balustrade. And the tall, half-withered agave which had reared its emaciated trunk in front of the abandoned building stood with a broken neck, a sorrowful reminder of hurried and reckless departure.

'That now,' said Rousset, 'that looks pretty.'

He shook his head.

'And the little fellow,' said Fabri, 'the little old man, he rode at their head. Right in front he rode.' He nodded eagerly. 'I saw him, and no mistake.'

'The Centurion?' asked Fortescue.

'I don't know what he calls himself,' answered Fabri, rubbing his neck with the back of his hand, 'but he lives over there in the empty house with the crazy words chalked above the porch. And all dressed up he was too. Plumed hat and silver spurs and white gloves and a

long sword too. I swear to you. That's how it was. And now they're gone.' Fabri looked about him sadly. 'I should have liked to have a good look at those horses. I wonder whether they'll ever come back?' 'I'll go and have a look,' mumbled Rousset.

He walked off on slow, shuffling feet across the square, and behind him the small crowd dispersed. After all, there was nothing more to be seen and little more to be said. Most of the citizens returned to their beds.

'That moon to-night,' grumbled old Gidéon, 'it's enough to give anyone queer ideas.'

'Yes,' said Madame Rose excitedly. 'And look, there's a fire too. Way up there in the forest. And what a big one, gracious Lady!'

Standing in front of the Centurion's house, Rousset Barthélemy wondered whether he should enter or not. It was dark inside and nothing stirred. The window was closed, but the door was ajar. Rousset pushed it gently, and with a slight creaking noise it swung wide open. He peered inside from the doorstep. He could see nothing. He took a step forward and struck his lighter. The place was empty. The Master of the City had gone.

But he had departed in great haste. There was his three-legged stool in the corner, but it was overturned. There was his leather satchel lying on the stone floor near the door. Rousset picked it up. It was empty. But as he bent down he saw something gleaming and shining near the fireplace. Carefully, almost afraid to touch it, he lifted it from the floor. It was the silver stopper. And the black belly-shaped bottle sat in the corner, not far away.

Rousset Barthélemy breathed heavily. Large beads of sweat began to trickle down his neck. His lighter had gone out. But enough moonlight fell through the open door for him to see. He weighed the heavy, beautifully chiselled stopper in his hand, wondering. Then he reached for the bottle. It was heavy too; it seemed full. For a second Rousset hesitated. Then he glanced quickly over his shoulder to the door. He was alone. No one was near. Swiftly he put the bottle to his lips and had a long gulp. He paused. What was it the King had told him? One gulp the past. Two gulps the future. He smiled and had another.

The wine flowed thick and oily from the bottle. His head began to

turn. He felt unsure on his feet. Ah, I must sit down, he thought. Where was the stool? He staggered across the narrow room. Here it was. He dragged it near the door. Oh, coolness, soothing coolness. The wine had a black and burning taste. It made his eyes swim, the blood drum in his ears. He stared at the bottle in his hand. I must sit down, he told himself; I must sit down. He staggered. He stumbled. The bottle fell and broke.

He sat on the stool and stared at the fragments on the floor. Then his puzzled gaze wandered over the embossed stopper which he still held between thumb and forefinger. And then the floor again and the broken glass. Funny, Rousset thought, the floor is dry. Nothing is spilled. The bottle must have been empty.

He closed his eyes. Ah, but he had felt the wine on his tongue this very moment, its black and burning taste. Its smell of smoke, of leaves smouldering on the dry earth in the thin air of the high mountains. Its taste of ripe, juicy grapes smarting alive in fire, of the stalks of vines burning slowly, their brown skin dry and charred, their sap pressed out by the burning heat, sizzling, simmering, dripping boiling-hot on to the dry earth, with the thin air and the smoke of the burning leaves drifting across the field and the cold, golden sweetness of the pale autumn sun mingling with it.

'Almighty Lord!' he murmured to himself with a heavy tongue. 'Almighty Lord and Holy Virgin, have pity!'

He pressed his swimming head between his big palms.

'The vineyards on fire!' he murmured. 'The grapes going up in flames! Have mercy, have pity! My fathers! My sons! The wine is on fire, Jesus and Mary!'

'Wake up, patron!' shouted a loud voice. 'Barthélemy, wake up!'

It was old Jaubert who stood before him.

'What is it?' asked Rousset, opening his eyes.

'There's a fire up in Vargelonnes. As large as the sky! The whole forest is aflame!'

'Already?'

He rose and walked into the square. All of a sudden his head was clear. The square was crowded with people, all gazing into the night where far away a huge sheet of flames stood above the mountains.

'It's Peira-Colonna,' muttered Rousset Barthélemy.

Hour after hour they sat watching, from Joannon's porch, the small path that comes down from the gorge towards the bridge of Roquefort, Rousset, Fortescue, and Renée in their midst.

'He's not coming back,' said Renée. 'Why are you watching?'

'He'll come,' answered Rousset with a heavy heart.

'Wait until dawn,' said Fortescue.

But dawn never seemed to come. The night dragged on interminably, and the poisonous moon would not fade. Hour after hour it cast its greenish, sickening light over the forest and the gorge and the path on which nothing stirred.

'He's not coming,' said Renée. 'Why are you watching?'

'He'll come,' answered Rousset.

'No. He's not coming. I know he isn't.'

It grew cold. Their hands felt damp. Moisture settled on their clothes. In the distance the great fire was still burning, and the night wind began to carry the smell of charred wood and smouldering masonry across the forest down into the Land of the Hundred Hills. Great birds had awakened in the woods and, frightened by the glare and the odour of fire, were fleeing towards the plain and the lowlands. And still there was no life on the path.

'He's not coming,' said Renée, and rose between the men. 'When the horsemen departed for Peira-Colonna, that was the hour when he died. Under the poplars.'

'There he comes!' cried Fortescue. 'Look, down the path!'

The figure of a man had indeed emerged from the gorge. He came running down the path towards the bridge in breathless haste.

'At last,' sighed Rousset Barthélemy.

But Renée turned her back to the mountains and the forest. She looked at her father and shook her head.

'It's not him, Father,' she murmured. 'It's a stranger who's come to say that he's lying dead under the poplars.'

She pressed her face into her palms, and Rousset caught her as she sank on her knees.

'Let's go away, Father,' she sobbed. 'Please, let's go away, Father, from this place.'

Rousset Barthélemy held her head pressed against his shoulder, his right hand stroking her hair. His eyes were still searching the wood

and the gorge and the path that comes down towards the bridge. Then he looked up at the festering moon, and the hot, black taste of the burning wine was again on his lips.

Go away? he thought, terrified. Go away from this place?

The stranger turned out to be the pilgrim named Great Stork.

'The one called Boromé, the old one, has sent me,' he said, 'because I run fastest.'

Exhausted, he let himself sink on the steps of the fountain, brushing his tousled hair from his face. The smell of the plain and the forest, of smoke and fire, still hung in his tattered clothes. Fearfully the citizens gathered round him. It was still dark, but there was no one now in Roquefort who wasn't awake.

'Is it true?' asked Rousset Barthélemy. 'Joannon?'

The Great Stork nodded.

'And the great Jehan le Noir, he also is dead. Who killed him, we don't know. But his slain body was found, they say, under the rubble and ashes of his house, and his men are on their way across the plateau.'

'How many are they?' asked Rousset.

The Great Stork paused for breath and wiped his smoke-begrimed face.

'I don't know. I haven't seen them. But Canneton and Bastien and Maurin, who've watched them come towards them across the plateau, they say there's something about them that isn't natural. At times they're only a handful. Then again it seems they're thousands and thousands of fellows. Of course one doesn't see much at night, and it's difficult to tell. But Canneton, he says there are plenty of ghosts among them.'

'Ghosts?' asked Fabri with a shudder.

'Ghosts,' confirmed the Great Stork with a nod. 'That's what he says. Plenty of them. Many more ghosts than real people.'

'And who set fire to Peira-Colonna?' asked Fortescue.

The pilgrim shrugged his shoulders.

'We don't know. But there's an Italian up there who calls himself Napoleone, and he says the men of Le Noir are coming towards Roquefort for great revenge. We caught him in the woods, this man,

but he got away again in the confusion. Do you know him? Should we have killed him?’

‘It wouldn’t have been a bad idea,’ suggested Gidéon.

But Rousset Barthélemy shook his head. ‘It wouldn’t make any difference,’ he sighed. ‘What about the others? Where are they?’

‘Two are coming,’ answered the Great Stork. ‘The woman and the blacksmith. No more. The woman, I think something’s happened to her. She’s out of her mind a little.’

‘And the boy? Haven’t they got him?’

‘No,’ answered the pilgrim. ‘They had him and they lost him again. The blacksmith will tell you. He vanished under his hands, he says. Like that. They never found him again.’

He looked at the men from large, earnest eyes.

‘And the soldier?’ asked Fabri into the sudden silence. ‘Has no one seen him?’

‘No one,’ answered the pilgrim. ‘Perhaps he lost his way. Perhaps he lost his life. Perhaps he will turn up. Perhaps not.’

He paused and then rose from the fountain steps. He looked at the men once more from quiet, reflective eyes. Then he said in a curiously solemn tone: ‘The son of the forest we bury at sunrise at St. Arluc. So now I must go.’

The night was lifting as Archambault and Janine emerged from the gorge of the Varouse. The forest was still thick with darkness, but beyond, above the Land of the Hundred Hills, the sky was growing light. The moon at last had gone; the stars had paled and vanished one by one. Before them the fortress on the rock reared its mist-shrouded head towards the approaching day, and all around it at its feet, still in deep slumber, stood the corn, cut and in ricks, awaiting the hour of harvest; stood the terraced vineyards heavy with dew-coated grapes, and among them the retreating shadows of the night played a last weaving game of silent hide-and-seek before they dissolved.

A lark rose from a tuft of grass down by the river and with short, hesitant trill soared above the poplars towards the reddening sky.

There was the bridge.

‘There,’ said Archambault as gently as he could, with a voice hoarse

from fatigue and the dampness of the night. 'We're home. Now cry no more.' He sighed. 'It won't make it any easier.'

Janine nodded. She understood. Her tears ceased to flow. But the look in her eyes was glassy and distant, and the faint smile that passed across her lips frightened the blacksmith.

'There's some one on the bridge,' he said, relieved. He called out. 'Hoy, Fabri! Is that you? What are you doing there?'

'Watching the river!' answered the Keeper of the Horses. 'Can't think what's the matter with it. Seems it's gone all crazy.'

No, no, please, thought the blacksmith. It's enough. What is he talking about? He hurried to the bridge.

Fabri stood leaning over the railing, gazing into the grey, misty water. He gave the blacksmith a quiet nod, as if to say, Don't trouble yourself, old man, trying to tell us, because we all know. Archambault nodded back, thankful. Then Fabri lifted his head. The figure of the girl emerged from the floating shrouds of dawn and stepped on to the bridge.

'Salute, Janine,' he said heavily and with a foggy voice.

'Salute, Fabri,' she answered slowly, as if she could speak only with difficulty. But to Fabri, at this moment, her voice had a sweet and almost angelic clarity in which there was nothing strange. There was not even sadness in it, it seemed, but a serenity and graceful poise which, for no apparent reason, made him feel deeply ashamed.

He blushed and brusquely turned away.

'Look!' he exclaimed. 'Can't you see, Archambault? Who the devil's interfering with the river? There's less and less water coming down. And over there! It's branching off, isn't it?'

'Where? I can't see a thing.'

'Over there. Just where it emerges from the gorge. At the big white boulder, just before it makes the sharp bend. Can't you see? You passed the spot only a moment ago; didn't you notice? It's breaking away from its course; that's what it is doing. I wish it were fully light and one could see what is going on.'

Archambault had been looking intently in the direction of the gorge for a considerable time without saying a word. Now suddenly he straightened himself with a jerk.

'You're right!' he grunted through the mist. 'You know what it is

doing, that creature of a river? There, look down that way, and you'll see. It's searching its old bed. It's going back to its old bed, round the other side of the rock, as truly as we're standing here. My hat!' he gasped. 'What a business! Look! It's pushing right down; it's even knocking the white boulder out of the way. Right down, I say. There's hardly any more water coming down our way. I wonder what we're going to have this bridge for? In another half-hour it'll be all dried up this side. Now I ask you!'

'We've got to tell the patron! And the others. Because——'

'Because if the Varouse is going back to its old bed we aren't going to have a drop of water on the whole of the other side where all the fields are and the grazing grounds and——' His voice trembled. 'You know, Fabri, this is more than crazy. It's awful.'

The two men stood staring at each other. For a moment they said nothing. Fabri was rubbing his neck with the back of his hand.

'Now,' said the blacksmith at length, 'it seems we even have the river against us.'

Fabri nodded. 'It's almost as if,' he muttered, 'as if——'

He gave a shrug and sighed.

'As if there was something wrong with this whole place.'

He turned his back to the river.

'Come, Janine,' he said gently, and took her by her hand, like a small child.

And she followed him, silently and obediently, up the Bourgade.

The sun had not yet risen.

Lights were still burning here and there behind windows in the square, and their pale reflections mingled, shivering and unsure, with the bluish grey of dawn that filtered through the alleyways. The citizens were awake. Wood was being chopped on doorsteps, coffee made in the kitchens. The voices of the children came from the vaults and passages, the fountain spluttered and gurgled in the half-light as buckets and jugs were filled and the men arrived, singly and in groups, to wash.

Four or five men were sitting in front of Madame Rose's behind glasses of steaming coffee. Archambault walked up to them.

'Where's the patron?' he demanded. 'Where's Barthélemy?'

Jaubert pointed with his thumb at Rousset's house. There were lights in its windows; every one seemed awake. The door stood open. And on the doorstep sat Rousset. He had his legs drawn up and his elbows propped up on his knees, and, hunched up like this, his bearded face enclosed in his palms, he sat staring, motionless, in front of him, without paying any attention to what went on in his house or around him. It looked almost as if he were asleep.

'What's the matter with him?' asked Archambault.

Modeste gave a shrug. 'Nothing. He's been sitting there ever since that fellow arrived with the news.'

'But the river!' insisted the blacksmith. 'Does he know about the river?'

'River?' asked Valette. 'What's wrong with it? Is it on fire?'

'No. But it's running away. Hasn't Fabri told you? It's turned and is flowing the other way. That's what it is doing. In its old bed.'

He nodded to his friends with an air of angry satisfaction on his tired and shrivelled old face.

'*Sacré!*' gasped Jaubert and rose. 'Are you sure?'

'No joking, blacksmith?'

'But how the devil——'

Hastily they emptied their coffee glasses.

'Let's go and see!'

All at once there were shouts and calls from all sides. Within a few minutes a crowd had gathered and was hurrying down the Bourgade.

'The river! The river! The river!'

Archambault, left alone, looked about him. A faint red glow appeared above the forest of Vargelonnes and began slowly to spread over the sky. The blacksmith scratched his head below his cap and walked up to Rousset Barthélemy.

'Well, patron,' he said, 'doesn't it interest you, this business about the river?'

The patron merely shrugged his hunched-up shoulders.

'Won't you go and look?'

The patron shook his head and then looked up from his palms. 'Why should I?' he asked. 'It doesn't surprise me. I thought it would happen one day, sooner or later.' He looked at his old friend from large, deep eyes, and an earnest little smile played round his bearded

lips. 'It's in the nature of things, Archambault,' he added. 'It's all in the pattern.'

Archambault did not understand. He waited for an explanation, but none came.

'Pattern!' he finally said. 'What does that mean? After all, a river——'

'Yes,' answered Rousset. 'As I said——'

The blacksmith looked at the patron closely, his eyes screwed up under his big bushy brows.

'Patron,' he said, 'are you sure you're not talking queerly? I'd understand, to be sure, after all that's happened, if things were turning strange in your mind for a moment, only——'

Rousset looked good-humouredly at the worried and anxious face of the blacksmith and then quietly shook his head again.

'No, no, Archambault,' he answered. 'Don't you worry. I'm not turning strange.'

'Well, then, explain yourself.'

'Sit down,' said the patron, and pointed to the empty space by his side on the doorstep. The blacksmith did as he was told. There was a moment of silence between the two. They heard the voices of the Barthélemy family from the kitchen and La Mère's heavy, slurring step going to and fro.

'Look,' said Rousset. 'I'm going to tell you a story. Listen. About the night when I first came here, before any of you arrived. There was no one here in this place, not a soul except that queer old man. Me, I was surprised, you know, when I reached the rock and found the river on the wrong side. I couldn't imagine what had come about. Things were all different from the way I had expected them. There was to be a bridge and two cypresses, but I found none of it. It had all been swallowed up, and the river was on the wrong side. So I asked the old fellow that night. "What's happened to the river?" I asked. "The river," answered the little man, "has locked the gate to the city. So that those who have stayed should stay and those who have gone should remain gone." That's what he said. And later he added this: "Don't you and those sons of yours build a bridge," he said. "It will do no good. If you build a bridge, people will come. If people come, trouble comes. Strangers. Misfortune." There you are, Archambault. That's what that wise old fellow said. So why be surprised, eh?'

But Archambault shook his head, dissatisfied. 'You said you were going to explain.'

'I am explaining,' answered Rousset patiently. He spread the fingers of his large, horny hands before him, meaning thus to make things clearer. 'If the river's turned back to its old bed,' he said slowly, 'it's because it is mocking at that bridge of ours. That's the way I figure it. The bridge's going to do no good. If we go down now, you and I and my sons who have built it, and destroy it and hack it to pieces before the men of Le Noir arrive, that wouldn't help to bar their way into the city. The river is the lock to the city, bridge or no bridge. And the lock is withdrawn. So——'

He raised his hands and let them drop back on his knees.

'You've got a large mind, patron,' said the blacksmith after a while. 'A very large mind. But it is reasoning in a queer fashion, I'm sure.'

He sighed and gazed across the square.

'What's going to happen?'

'How can I know?' answered Rousset. He rose and pulled up his trousers. 'Something's going to happen before long. I'm waiting for it.' He gazed at the sky. 'It's getting light,' he said. 'I'm going down to Joannon's house for a while to watch. One's got a better view from its porch. Coming with me?'

'No,' answered the blacksmith. 'I've seen enough.'

He remained sitting where he was on the Barthélemy doorstep and watched Rousset's large, bulky figure move across the square past the inn, the church, and the citadel and finally saw it disappear down the narrow vaulted alleyway that led to Joannon's house. At last, when he was about to rise, he saw Fabri coming across the square towards him. The Keeper of the Horses was walking slowly, with careful steps. Pressed under his left arm he carried a flute of bread, and in his hands he held an earthen bowl filled with something he was obviously anxious not to spill.

Where the dickens is he off to, wondered the blacksmith, with a bowl of coffee and a flute of bread? But before he had time to ask Fabri had already called out to him.

'Ho, Archambault!' he shouted happily. 'You'd better go and see your friend Nicholas. Seems he's going sort of queer.'

'Queer?' answered the blacksmith. 'Nicholas? That's nothing very new. He's never been anything else, that one.'

'Oh, but go and have a look at him. He's walking about in a red woollen cap as if it were winter, and he's asked me for his horse. And in a hurry too. At once he wants it. What do you think he wants the horse for? And the cap?'

'You're right,' grunted Archambault in sudden alarm. 'He must be really crazy this time. Damn him!'

He rose and walked off across the square and towards the bake-house as fast as his tired legs would carry him. He did not even bother to look back over his shoulder to see where Fabri was going.

Fabri went up to Janine's house and knocked at the door. There was no answer. He pushed the door slightly and it swung open. Inside it was dark. Fabri deposited the bowl and the bread he had brought on the table by the window and struck his lighter. It's flickering light danced across the ceiling and the walls of the kitchen and fell upon Janine, who was sitting on the low stool in front of the dark, empty hearth, her hands folded in her lap, looking in front of her from quiet, undisturbed eyes. Fabri found the tallow candle in the saucer on the ledge of the fireplace and lighted it. Janine, when she saw him, looked up and smiled at him, a vague and meaningless smile. It made Fabri blush.

'I've brought you some coffee and bread,' he said with a voice that seemed to hover about the room like a helpless bird looking vainly and desperately for somewhere to perch. 'Wouldn't you like some?' he asked timidly.

'Yes,' she answered gratefully. 'It's nice to have it light in here, isn't it? Did you light the candle?'

'I did,' he said.

'I thought you were Godefroy,' she answered. Her voice sounded clear and almost light-hearted. 'Because you lighted the candle. He always does first thing in the morning. And he lets me blow it out last thing in the evening. They won't be long now, Godefroy and Rémy. They'll be here any moment. They've only gone to get some firewood.'

Fabri answered nothing. He took the bowl and the bread from the

table and placed the bowl with the hot coffee in her lap between her hands. Then he broke the bread for her.

'Here,' he said unsurely. 'Eat, Janine.'

She ate and drank, quietly and without speaking. Her face was calm and attentive. There was no fatigue on it, not a trace of tiredness that could have told of the past day and night. After a while she put down the bowl and looked at Fabri.

'Sit down, Fabri,' she said, 'I must tell you something.'

She spoke softly, almost in a murmur now. Fabri sat down on the step of the fireplace in front of her. The first haze of daylight had begun to filter through the narrow window. On the ledge the tallow candle flickered. Outside the square was flooded with the red-and-gold burst of sunrise. A wistful smile played round Janine's lips.

'I'll tell you a secret, Fabri,' she said. 'But you must keep it to yourself. The others don't know yet. Promise?'

He nodded.

'They've run away. Godefroy and Rémy.' She nodded to herself. 'Yes, they've run away together. They were only going to get firewood. That's what they said. But they've run away. And they've left me alone.'

Fabri nodded. Hesitatingly he reached for her hand which lay limply in her lap, and she gave it willingly. He held it between his large fingers and did not know what to do with it.

'But you mustn't tell anybody,' she whispered.

'No,' he answered. Then he said, 'But I'm here, Janine. I——'

But she did not seem to hear. Suddenly she withdrew her hand.

'She's crying,' she said with a dark, trembling voice.

There was a haunted, fearful look of utter unhappiness in her eyes.

'She's crying,' she muttered. 'Inside me the little one is crying. I can hear her, she's weeping and whimpering.'

Fabri had risen to his feet. He was not afraid of the unknown, the unfathomable and unaccountable with which he found himself faced. His humble heart knew little, but it knew pity, measureless, generous pity for the pains of God's tortured creatures, and to him it was the same as love. He stretched out his two hands, surely and without trembling, and drew her head towards him so that it rested against his knees. He stroked her hair as he would stroke the mane of a

frightened foal, and slowly calm and quiet returned to her trembling limbs.

'But I'm here,' he said warmly, with the shepherd's firmness and certainty. 'I'm here, Janine. I'm here.'

'And?' demanded Archambault.

'And nothing,' answered the baker. 'I'm taking myself away. As you see.'

The blacksmith saw. The baker's cart was standing in front of the bakehouse, and it was piled high with big Père Nicholas' belongings, including his entire bakery outfit, from his kneading trough, baking pans, pastry boards, down to his scales, weights, wicker baskets, and large bread knife. The dappled horse was there, too, looking as sleepy and uninterested as ever but, none the less, ready to depart. And Nicholas was wearing his red woollen cap. It was clear that his decision was definite and irrevocable.

'I don't understand you at all,' said the blacksmith. 'You're not clearing out, Nicholas? Not altogether?' .

The baker stared at his friend from large, terrified eyes that struggled in vain to assume a defiant expression. Perhaps he had hoped to depart without being seen by his old companion and drawn into an argument. At any rate, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the blacksmith, at this decisive moment, had thrown him into visible confusion. As always, he was afraid of Archambault. But he was also afraid of something else. He fumbled the reins of his horse and timidly, as if expecting instant reproof, nodded.

'Yes,' he stammered. 'Altogether. I've made up my mind.'

'And where to?'

'Home.'

'But this is home, Nicholas.'

The baker shook his head. 'I thought it was. But it isn't. I should never have come to this place. Now I'm going back to Terrerouge. And as fast as I can.'

'But why?'

The baker did not answer. He was chewing his upper lip and avoiding Archambault's eyes.

'Why, Nicholas? Without even telling anybody.'

'Oh,' shrugged the baker. 'I've put up a notice on the door of the bakehouse. There, you can see it. It says, "*Parti pour raisons privées* [Gone for private reasons]." People will understand.'

'But why, Nicholas?' insisted the blacksmith.

'Do you really want to know? Can't you guess?'

The bak^{er}'s voice had suddenly become sharp and angered. There was an impatient and annoyed expression in his sallow face which Archambault knew and disliked. It was a sign that the baker was about to say something nasty and yet darkly truthful.

'Because I'm frightened, Archambault,' he said. 'Because I'm afraid of this place.'

'But why should you be frightened?'

'Why shouldn't I? The things that are going on are enough to scare one out of one's wits. And don't think I'm the only one to be scared. Everybody is. You are too, and if you don't know it yet you'll soon find out. Only I'm a coward, Archambault; I've always been one, and so I admit it. That's the whole difference.'

He lowered his voice.

'At Terrerouge I had the *cafard*. I thought I couldn't stand it, so I came here. But here I get the creeps. And that I can stand even less. So I go away again. It's only reasonable. I'd much rather have the *cafard* than the creeps. Who wouldn't?'

He looked up, now genuinely defiant.

'Besides, I'm my own master. I can do as I choose.'

The blacksmith, to the baker's surprise, did not contradict him. He nodded. He looked at his friend in his red woollen cap, at his cart piled high with all his belongings, at his sad and sleepy old horse. He cast a furtive glance into the black and empty hollow of the deserted bakehouse and at the notice that was pinned to its door. For a moment he munched his drooping moustache and then nodded again.

'Perhaps,' he grunted, 'perhaps you're right, Nicholas. It never occurred to me—'

Suddenly he broke off. He looked up and sniffed. He stared at the baker and sniffed again.

'Can you smell anything, Nicholas?' he asked nervously.

The baker nodded.

'Something's burning. Something's on fire.'

'It wouldn't be your oven?'

Nicholas shook his head. Unspeakable terror showed in his face. With mouth and eyes wide open he stared at the blacksmith. His hands dropped the reins. His lips trembled.

'What is it, Archambault? What is it?'

Archambault gave no answer. What a strange smell it is, he thought. And whence does it come? It's in the air, isn't it? Or is it coming straight out of the earth? Only a moment ago it was just a faint wafting odour that came and passed. Now it comes floating across the roofs of the city in thick streaming clouds. What a choking, biting smell it is. And how sweet, too, how strong and sweet and burning hot. Ah yes, it's coming up from down below. It's coming up from the fields. It's coming up to the rock from the vineyards, from the pastures and orchards.

'The corn,' he murmured. 'The grapes.'

Suddenly a yelling scream broke from his hoarse old throat.

'The corn is burning! Jesus and Mary! The vineyards are on fire!'

Within a second the square was filled with a frantic crowd, rushing hither and thither in aimless confusion. La Mère appeared on her doorstep, calling for Rousset, who was nowhere to be seen. Fabri hurried across the square to ring the alarm bell which soon filled the burning, smoke-clouded morning air with a fearful din. The men who had been down by the river came hurrying up the Bourgade, white of face and with watering eyes. Scarlet and golden sparks were flying by the million over the roofs of the city. Through it all Nicholas, the baker, with his cart and horse, raced off, as if set upon by the devil, down the Bourgade, across the bridge and out of sight. No one noticed his departure.

18

AT THE EDGE of the wood the soldier sat down.

I've lost my way, he thought; surely I must have lost my way. Barbiche's little fire has gone out and I've walked in the wrong direc-

tion all the time. I have crossed the plateau and I have crossed the wood, and this is the clearing. But there is no village. There are no pilgrims. I've lost my way.

He closed his eyes. I'm tired, he thought; I can't go any farther. Darkness is falling, and my eyes are blind with exhaustion and hunger and thirst. My shoulder hurts. I must have broken it. Long flashes of burning-hot pain kept running through his whole body at regular intervals, like the waves of the oncoming sea. But I cannot remain sitting here, he thought. If I remain sitting here, my head buried like this in my lap, with the pain throbbing through my limbs, like waves of fire, I shall die. Surely, if I remained sitting like this, it would not be long before I died. I must get up. I must walk on. Somehow. Somewhere.

He rose to his feet and walked on. Ah yes, I can walk on, he thought. It isn't so bad. It's going to be quite all right. After all, it is only my shoulder that is injured and not my legs. He opened his eyes and smiled to himself. I think I know now where I am, he told himself. I must keep to the right, along the edge of the wood, and then across the clearing, and that will get me to the village and the pilgrims. There I can rest and walk the remainder of the way to-morrow. Yes—he smiled to himself—I know now where I am; it is quite easy from here onwards, quite easy. I shall just sit down for another moment. Then it will be easier. But I mustn't fall asleep. If I fall asleep I shall die.

He sat down again, leaning against a large oblong boulder. He felt chilly and feverish. There was a veil of damp blue haze hanging before his eyes, swimming grey-blue dusk which gently rose from the ground towards the as yet half-lit sky. Tall pine trees stood about him on all sides, framing the small clearing where boulders, big and small, and the sawn-off trunks of other pines hovered about silently, like outsize grey-and-blue rabbits. There was not a sound except for the wind, which now and then in a sudden rush swept through the mushroom-like crowns of the pine trees and then died away again. Darkness was falling rapidly.

He felt very cold. He closed his eyes for a moment and stretched his legs. I mustn't fall asleep, he thought vaguely. I must keep awake.

When he opened his eyes again some one was sitting beside him

and looking at him. It was a man in black trousers and a white shirt with a large wide-brimmed hat drawn deep into his face.

'Ah, it's you,' said the soldier. 'How did you get here?'

'I'm on my way,' answered the stranger. 'Do you mind if I sit down for a while beside you?'

'Not at all. But aren't you dead?'

'Quite dead. You should know. You killed me.'

'Did I?' asked the soldier. 'Are you quite sure?'

'Absolutely,' answered the stranger. 'I don't know why you did it, because it wasn't really your business at all. But you did it.'

'And am I now dead too?' asked the soldier.

He was surprised by his own question. This is a very important thing to ask, he thought, and a great deal will depend on the answer. I wonder whether he knows?

The stranger looked at him for a long time and seemed to wonder. In the end he nodded.

'Yes,' he said. 'I think you're dead too. You fell down and broke your neck; wasn't that it?'

'No, my shoulder,' the soldier corrected him. 'It hurt like hell for a long time.'

But the stranger shook his head.

'You remember it wrong,' he said gently. 'It was your neck. You fell from a very great height. It was no wonder.'

He straightened himself up and pushed back his hat.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Was it also you who set fire to my house?'

'No,' answered the soldier. 'Why should I set fire to your house?'

'Why should you kill me?' answered the man. 'I'm just asking.'

He seemed slightly annoyed.

'No, no, it wasn't me,' the soldier tried to reassure him.

'If you're quite sure——'

'Quite sure.'

'Hum,' said the man, wondering. 'Then it must have been that foolish old man again. He's done it before.'

'You mean the Centurion?'

'Yes. Only now he is a Centurion no longer, you know. It's finished with his hundred men.'

'How's that?'

'My men killed them all this time. He won't come again.'

'But what are you going to do about your house?' asked the soldier. 'It's destroyed, isn't it?'

'My son will build it up again in time. Just as I built it again.'

'You mean the boy?'

'Yes,' nodded the stranger. 'They didn't get him. They never get the sons of Jehan le Noir. There's always one who survives, always. They ought to know that by now.'

He rose from the boulder on which he had been sitting and rolled down his shirt sleeves.

'Well, I must be going now,' he said. 'It's getting rather cold.'

'And dark too,' said the soldier.

'Where are you going from here?' asked the man. 'Back to your war?'

'No. That war is over. Besides, I never do things twice, as you do. I always try to do something new.'

'So you're not coming with me part of the way?'

'No,' answered the soldier. 'I'm staying on for a while. I'm waiting for some one, in fact.'

The stranger smiled.

'I shouldn't waste my time,' he said. 'She isn't coming.'

'How do you know?'

The man shrugged his shoulder knowingly.

'Oh, I know. She isn't coming this way any more. None of them are. They're all going the other way. That way.'

With his outstretched right arm he pointed southwards in the direction of the darkening forest and the lowlands and the sea.

'By the way, I've got something here that belongs to you. It's a bit from your aeroplane. The Italian brought it to me, thinking we should give it to the police and so get you locked up because you're a foreigner and have no papers. It was a stupid idea. He didn't know you were dead and that it was all nonsense. So here you are. I don't want the thing.'

He pulled something from his trouser pocket and tossed it in the grass beside the soldier.

'Well, so long then. And good luck.'

'Good luck,' answered the soldier, and watched the stranger disappear in the darkness.

After he had gone the soldier turned on his other side and looked about him. Yes, he thought, of course this is the place. Slightly to his right, shrouded in the gathering folds of darkness, he distinguished vaguely the outline of his aeroplane. Crouching on its belly, armless and feetless, its nose buried stupidly in the ground, its spine hunched up in grotesque clumsiness, the wreckage was a comforting sight. How good to know, he thought, that we've always been here, you and I, in this lonely place in the wilderness. And now we'll stay here together. Because, as he says, she isn't coming this way any more.

He raised his head a little and looked out over the tree-tops towards the sea. No, she isn't coming this way any more. The great ship will sail at the stroke of midnight and she will sail without me. I can see her, strange and illuminated, at the edge of the forest, with all lights set and shimmering through the darkness. How beautiful she is.

He let his face drop back into the grass. A very cold wind had begun to blow down from the plateau of Vargelonnes, and it gathered in the pine tops and shook them violently with a swishing, brushing sound.

Rousset Barthélemy was sitting alone on the porch of Joannon's house, his knees drawn up as was his habit, his bearded face resting in the palms of his large hands. The glow of the fire was sitting like a red fever in his face, on his cheeks and forehead; showers of sparks from the burning ricks, caught by a sudden gush of autumn air, would suddenly descend like clouds of fiery spray and singe his hair and beard; huge billowing masses of black, grey, and green smoke, acid, biting smoke of almost all colours, trailed along overhead and before his eyes; for moments they would envelop him, blind him, and make him disappear, but when they had passed and the sparks had died Rousset would merely shake his head, pass his palms over his eyes, and go on staring down into the valley, across the fields, the vineyards, the pastures. His eyes would stray a little to the left where the path came down from the forest towards the city, then a little to the right where the dry and empty bed of the river wound its way purposelessly through the burning fields, like a bleached, disjointed spine of some immeasurably large animal that had sprawled, dying, across these lands thousands of years ago. It had no resemblance to the river.

The river had gone the other way. From time to time Rousset, half blinded by the smoke and heat that were coming up from below, where the great fire raged like a foaming sea round the rock of the city, would lift his eyes and they would follow the trail of the clouds for a little while. The sun had risen; its golden light penetrated, gracefully and without effort, the solid masses of smoke, lighting them up with a curious, bright inward shine which made them look only the more terrifying and incomprehensible. There was a soft, steady autumn breeze blowing from the heights of Vargelonnes, and it drove the fire on, from field to field, from vineyard to vineyard, and it drove the clouds with it.

Some one was coming down the steps of the alley and presently stood beside him. Rousset looked up.

'Oh, it's you, Archambault,' he said. 'I see you've put your hat on. So you're going away?'

'Yes,' replied the blacksmith. 'I think I'm going away. I've come to say good-bye, in fact.'

'Of course,' nodded Rousset. He looked at his friend and then, with a shrug, stretched out his hands before him in a helpless gesture, as if to say: Of course, look at it yourself. What is there I could say that could make you change your mind? Nothing. 'Of course, of course,' he said, and went on staring out over the burning land.

'You too,' said the blacksmith after a while. 'You should go, for the sake of your people. I mean women and children, you know.'

'Yes,' nodded Rousset. 'I know.'

He paused and passed his hands over his eyes.

'I saw them do it,' he then said. 'Sitting up here and watching, I actually saw them do it. They came out of the forest at the crack of dawn, one here, one there, tiny black figures in the mist of dawn, hurrying towards the fields, not many—twelve men, perhaps, altogether, or fifteen—they ran about the fields, hither and thither, busy like mice, Archambault, and then up went one little fire; up went another, a third, a fourth, as if they had studied it, and before you had counted them all, the burning ricks, they were all one mass of fire, and the fellows had gone. What a thing to do! I saw it with my own eyes. What a thing.'

He shook his head, still puzzled and amazed, it seemed, unable to

grasp the weirdness of the spectacle, unwilling, too, to believe in its reality.

'Well, then, salute, patron,' said the blacksmith.

'Salute to you, Archambault. Anything else you'd want me to say?'

'No, patron. One's always understood one another, eh?'

Rousset nodded. When the blacksmith had gone he rose to his feet. The fire had done with the fields nearest to the wood. It had left them a dark, smouldering carpet over which the golden sun played a game of glittering ringlets and curls, dots, and spirals. The fire had done with the grazing grounds nearest to the river bed too; it had raced across them, blackening the dark green grass, and left them behind. It was advancing. It seemed that it was turning the foot of the rock. Rousset, standing erect, tried to follow its course with his eyes. But it was swiftly moving out of sight from where he stood. It had jumped across the deserted river bed and thrust itself into the orchards. Perhaps it had already reached the lowest steps of the terraced vineyards.

The hosts of smoke clouds now rose from beyond the tip of the city. They were still travelling south, towards the hills and the sea, and Rousset, who watched them, found that they were oddly shaped and formed. They had begun to resemble faces, heads, people, even, who were familiar to him, whom he knew.

'Ah, there you are,' murmured Rousset as he looked at their silent procession across the sky. He was not surprised to see them, but somehow and very suddenly it filled him with great anguish to see them wander away from him, leaving him where he stood, alone, a deserted watcher. 'Wait, wait,' he murmured, 'not yet, not so fast. Wait.'

But they did not wait for him. They travelled on. The shadow of his grandfather, tall, gaunt in his seventy-fourth year, his slashed face shaded against the sun by his high, broad-brimmed shepherd's hat, his blouse fluttering in the celestial wind. His grandfather's sons and daughters, their wives and husbands, he recognized them, too, silent, angry men and women who walked beside their horses and amid their dogs and cattle. He recognized every one of them as their silent procession moved across the skies, away from the old city towards the sea.

Rousset turned away and walked up the alleyway.

It was near the midday hour, but the square seemed empty; the city

had become silent. Here and there a voice came from a window; some one called but did not seem to receive an answer; a dog barked; in a side alley a cart was loaded; a child cried, and a donkey fussily stamped the cobblestones, unwilling to depart. Rousset cast a furtive glance towards his own house, as if afraid to look it straight in the face, as if he were half expecting to be called but did not want to answer, and quickly turned towards the inn. All around houses, only this morning full of life, looked at each other from shuttered windows and barred and bolted doors.

Three or four men were sitting in front of the inn.

'Salute, patron,' they said.

'Salute, the company,' answered Rousset. 'Madame Rose!'

'No Madame Rose,' said Jaubert.

'Gone?'

'Gone.'

Rousset sighed. Slowly he pushed his hands into his trouser pockets and let his eyes wander over the little house, the porch, the arbour, the ivy-covered walls, the painted sign hanging still in the sunlight. He said nothing.

'Well, what's going to happen, patron?' asked old Gidéon.

Rousset merely shrugged his shoulders.

'There's not many of us left,' remarked Jaubert after a while.

'Fabri. Janine. Us few here. And you and your folks. So one would like a word. A word of advice. What best to do.'

Rousset looked at the four men quietly, with a friendly and yet absent-minded smile, and then shrugged his shoulders again.

'You're not speaking, are you?' inquired Modeste.

Rousset shook his head. He looked at the four for another moment, then nodded to them and slowly turned away.

When he had disappeared down the steps behind the church Jaubert rose from the bench.

'What are we waiting for?' he asked. 'There's no point in staying. No point in trying to persuade oneself that there is. For there isn't. It's logical. Look at the fields. We've got nothing to eat. If we stay we'll starve. There. No use asking oneself a lot of questions or trying to puzzle out what isn't a puzzle. It's like that. A fact. So—for my part, I'm going. Salute, the company.'

He emptied his glass, then touched his cap with his right forefinger, and slowly shuffled off across the square and towards his house.

On the doorstep of the Barthélemy house appeared Renée. After a moment's hesitation and a shy glance over the empty square she came towards the inn. The three men, at her approach, rose from the bench.

'Where is he?' she asked. 'Have you seen him? My father?'

Old Gidéon nodded. Then, pointing with his right thumb over his shoulder, he indicated to her the direction in which Rousset had walked off.

'One wouldn't know what to say to her,' he remarked apologetically after she had gone. 'Considering what's happened to her.'

He shrugged his old shoulders and stared into his empty glass. 'Ah, what a misfortune,' he sighed. 'One mustn't even try to understand it.'

Modeste said nothing. He was cleaning his finger-nails with his clasp knife.

'I wonder if it's still burning?' he murmured after a while but made no attempt to find out. He knew that his field lay black and charred at the foot of the rock. He was not anxious to see it.

Renée found her father sitting among the ruins of the old Barthélemy house, high up above the precipice, gazing out over the devastated land.

He was leaning his back against the ruined wall, and his hands were shielding his eyes against the dazzling autumn sun. The fire, fanned by the breeze, had reached the hillside of Ollioure. There, on the dry, fruitless ochre soil it had consumed itself, flickered and smouldered a little among the withered olive trees and the dead stalks of the vines, and died.

'Papa,' said Renée.

'Yes, my daughter,' he answered without taking his eyes off the burned land. 'I'm coming.'

He stretched his hand out in her direction without looking up, and she grasped it, standing by his side, and thus they remained for a long time, still and silent. Together their eyes wandered over the land, from left to right and back again, from the foot of the rock to the hills and back again, and wherever they rested they saw the same and still could

not believe it. Renée, holding her father's hand, felt as if never again in her whole life would she be able to speak another word.

'Rée,' Rousset said. 'Rée, my girl.'

The corn ricks that were to have been loaded on the carts and brought up to the city by Fabri's horses this very morning to provide for the winter had crumbled to little black heaps of smouldering ashes. The fields were black and sent an evil, biting smell up to the city. In the golden autumn light, under a still and cloudless azure sky, the fruit trees had died in their fullness under the sudden onslaught of heat. Watched by a serene and blissful sun, apples and pears, oranges and plums had dropped from their branches and lay at the feet of their trees, a black-brown, shrivelled, and steaming mass of smouldering rot. The grapes had shed the richness of their juice on to the dry, thirsty earth that had avidly drunk it, and the vines were dead.

'Rée,' asked Rousset, 'what is your mother doing?'

'She's packing up the house,' answered the girl. 'And loading the cart.'

She paused for a moment. 'She told me to go and fetch you,' she added.

'Yes,' replied Rousset. 'Yes, my girl, I'm coming.'

He let go her hand and with a slow, tired gesture pointed towards the land.

'Look,' he said. 'The road——'

The road, that endless road of ochre dust! How strange and, at the same time, how cruelly familiar it was, winding away over the range of hills among the olive groves, down the next valley, away, so long, so endless, under the blue, cloudless sky, and how good it had once been to see it from above—the road departing and man remaining, how good it had once been and how heart-breaking it was now.

'How far one can see to-day,' he murmured. 'How much farther to-day than ever before!' He shook his head.

Ollioure, the little hamlet, seemed to lie within one's grasp. St. Saturnin des Vignes, Madone, Terrerouge, even, and beyond—his eyes kept following the dusty ochre road that wound its way over the hills from village to village, from hamlet to hamlet, until it was lost in the far-away blueness of the afternoon.

He saw them wander along the road, every one of them. The way

they had come was also the way they departed. Two only had not come this way, and they had not departed this way. Two had come from the forest, and to the forest they had returned. The others, small groups of tiny people, were slowly and painfully pushing up the nearer hillside beyond the devastated land; others had disappeared behind the slope; single figures wandered between them here and there.

A woman with a high basket on her back, was that not Madame Rose? A solitary man with a bundle in each hand, was it not Archambault? And the others? Rousset, shielding his eyes against the copper sun, thought he recognized them all as they wandered away into the afternoon among their carts and horses, their asses and goats and their children and dogs. A red cap gleamed in the brilliant stillness among the olive trees of Ollioure. Salute to you, Nicholas, the baker, thought Rousset; salute to you on your lonely way home to Terrerouge.

'When I first came here,' said Rousset, and once more grasped his daughter's hand.

'Yes, Papa,' answered Renée.

His eyes were now wandering, as if in search of something dropped among the ivy, over the mass of grey stone and thickly overgrown rubble that surrounded them, pausing here and there, dreamily, reflectingly.

'This,' he said, 'is your great-grandfather's house.'

He looked up to her who still stood by his side, and smiled.

'Over there,' he went on, now with a low, almost whispering voice, as if confiding to her an old and sweet secret, 'over there was his fireplace. Do you see? There the wooden bench where at dusk your great-grandfather would sit and watch your great-grandmother cook the soup in the big iron pot hanging over the fire from a chain and big black hook.'

He paused and smiled again, this time to himself.

'His small son,' he went on explaining, 'he would be riding on his knees, and the flames from the hearth would be dancing on his flushed little cheeks. And over there was the window from which this small boy, your grandfather, looked out into the sun-swept Land of the Hundred Hills. There the door and threshold over which, one wintry afternoon, he carried his young bride, my mother, the shantyman's daughter, from the great woods, into the family circle——'

He broke off. He looked at Renée and let her hand go.

'I shan't be long,' he said hastily and with an unsteady voice. 'Tell your mother I'm coming.'

Then he buried his bearded face in his large hands and looked up no more.

Fortescue took the dead caporal from his lips, tossed it over the parapet down into the river, and turned. Slowly, leaning on his stick he climbed the stairs of the narrow passage that led up to the square. It was late in the afternoon. Soon dusk would begin to fall.

The square was empty, as he had expected; Madame Rose's deserted, and he had thought it would be. For a moment he stood still in the middle of the square and let his eyes wander over the dead houses around him. Dead they were, all of them. Except the Barthélemy house. Its door stood open; there was still life inside. Fortescue wondered whether to approach. After a minute's hesitation he decided against it. He was going to wait.

He walked over to the inn and went inside. For a while he rummaged in the empty taproom, behind the zinc and among the shelves, and when he reappeared a little later he carried a dusty tumbler in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other. He placed bottle and glass on the table in the last golden rays of sunshine and sat down on the bench. Resting his back against the ivy-covered wall, he opened the bottle leisurely and filled his glass. For a moment he looked at it dreamily and lovingly and then raised it. The light made the dark red wine sparkle, and it glittered and gleamed on the brim of the glass and the smooth hard leaves of the dark green ivy.

Fortescue leaned back and gazed across the square. After a while he got out some tobacco and cigarette papers and with slow deliberation rolled himself a cigarette. He turned it carefully between his thumb and forefinger, looked at it fondly and at the same time critically, and finally stuck it to his upper lip. Then he fumbled for his lighter, but as he couldn't find it in his trouser pockets the cigarette remained unlit. Thus he sat waiting for Rousset Barthélemy. Presently he fell asleep.

From behind the church came the sound of the mouth organ and

the soft, measured clatter of hoofs. Fabri, astride his faithful Ulysse with Michelle and Bastien walking on either side, turned into the square. He had tied his few belongings into a bundle carried by Bastien. Michelle went empty. Playing softly to himself, he slowly crossed the square. As he approached the far end the door of the low house next to Rousset Barthélemy's opened and Janine stepped out. Fabri halted his horse. He ceased playing.

The sun darted across Janine's hair and cheeks in swift, golden flashes; it played about her lips. Did she smile? Fabri did not know. There was a large, distant look in her eyes which made him lower his own. He stretched his hand out towards her who stood on the doorstep, and obediently she came towards him, carrying her large bundle. He dismounted and tied the bundle next to his own on Bastien's broad back. Then he lifted her gently on to Ulysse and took the bridle. Slowly the horses began to move as he led them down the steep Bourgade.

'Play something, Fabri,' said Janine.

He looked up at her, and a blushing smile fled across his face. Then he nodded and took his mouth organ from his pocket. With his left hand holding Ulysse's reins, his right hand clasping the old and battered little instrument, he walked beside her. Where shall we go? he thought. St. Saturnin? Madone? Terrerouge, or beyond? Sweetly and sadly the music walked with the measured steps of the horses. Fabri looked at Ulysse, his faithful friend. Where shall we go, Ulysse? he asked. What is the name of the village just beyond Terrerouge, down on the road to the sea? Is it not Barquemou or something like that? It sounds nice, Barquemou, doesn't it?—peaceful and quiet and still. Should we go there? Ulysse nodded.

They crossed the bridge and turned to the right and followed the deserted river bed. Ulysse took careful steps among the wet and slippery pebbles. Fabri, holding the reins, looked back for a moment. The fortress stood high up in the skies. The long-drawn chords of his mouth organ trailed behind them in a trembling echo and scattered and dissolved.

At last Rousset Barthélemy came across the square. Dusk was falling; the light began to fade. The town lay in deep silence. The church cast

a long and slender shadow across the cobblestones, and only here and there a last fiery ray of copper sunlight shot over the roofs and vanished. Rousset walked up to the inn.

'I was wondering whether you were still here,' he said with a husky voice that was tired from sorrow and sleepless dreams.

'Yes, I'm still here,' answered Fortescue. 'I was waiting for you.'

'I'm glad. I must talk to some one.'

'Talk,' said Fortescue.

But Rousset Barthélemy said nothing. He sat down on the bench beside his old friend, held his heavy head in the palms of his hands, and remained silent.

After a while he lifted his face. With a slow, unspeakably tired gesture he reached across the table for Fortescue's glass. He raised it to his bearded lips with a trembling hand, emptied it, and put it back.

'All gone?' he asked, turning his face towards Fortescue. 'All and all?'

Fortescue nodded.

'And you?'

Fortescue shook his head. 'I'm not going,' he said.

'Not going?'

'Why should I?' answered his friend. 'I came here without a purpose, only for the sake of coming. So it's not difficult for me to stay without a purpose. I didn't expect to find anyone in this place when I first came, so why should I be surprised if in the end I'm left alone? With you, with all of you, it's different. You had a purpose.'

'Had we?' asked Rousset. Then he nodded. 'I suppose we had.'

He had folded his arms on the table top and looked silently in front of him.

'Look. The shadows,' he murmured, and his hand pointed into the square. 'It's curious how it reminds one just now.'

Fortescue knew what he meant. He remembered too.

In the alleyways, under the vaults and porches, behind the corners of houses and blind windows of deserted rooms, darkness had been waiting its hour. Now it began to slip out. It crept round the street corners; it stalked forward with caution from the arches. It made long, wafting strides as it moved across the square behind the backs of the two men who were sitting quietly by each other's side. Now

it came up the cobbled passage on a hundred small and swiftly running feet. It clambered over the window sills, reached out for the ground with long arms and legs, and stepped into the open. Quietly, at its approach the dead houses closed their eyes and tucked themselves away into the folds of the falling night.

Rousset Barthélemy sighed.

'It doesn't say itself,' he murmured. He raised his hands and let them drop again. 'It doesn't.'

He turned to Fortescue.

'Pour out some more,' he asked. Fortescue filled the darkening glass. 'This is what I wanted to say, but perhaps you won't understand. When we first came here La Mère said: "Where is one buried when one dies in this place? There is no cemetery." And I said: "Perhaps one doesn't die here; perhaps one lives for ever, or——"'

'Or,' said Fortescue, 'one goes away before one dies.'

Rousset nodded. 'Yes. But La Mère said: "I'm going to die here all right. I'm not moving myself any more." And she laughed as she said it. And now——'

He paused and swallowed.

'And now,' he murmured bitterly, 'she's yet got to move herself. Do you understand why that gives me such pain? It is such a small wish—isn't it?—to be allowed at least to die where one wishes to, such a very small wish. To lay one's dreams to rest in the place one has chosen.'

He straightened himself up.

'It's time,' he said with a husky voice. 'I must go. My children are waiting.' He rose from the bench. 'I must go,' he repeated.

His voice had grown very soft.

'Pour one more,' he asked. Fortescue filled the glass. Rousset Barthélemy raised it to his lips.

'Fortune,' he sighed. 'Fortune.'

'Fortune,' answered Fortescue.

After the Barthélemy family had departed Fortescue went once more into the inn and, rummaging below the zinc, found another bottle. With it he returned to the bench under the ivy, poured himself out another glass, and waited for the dawn. He fell asleep several

times and woke again. When he woke for the last time the sky was turning grey and he heard steps coming up the Bourgade. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He had another gulp from his glass. The wine was cold and made him shiver.

He looked up and saw the Centurion walk into the square.

'Ho!' he called with a raucous, sleepy voice. 'Tressaille!'

The little man gave a start and looked about him. Then he saw the man under the ivy.

'Good morning,' he rasped. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've been waiting for you,' answered Fortescue. 'Only I didn't think you would be so long. I fell asleep meanwhile.'

The Centurion nodded. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'It was a long business.'

Fortescue, from behind his wineglass, looked at him, and gradually his old wood-carved smile crept back into his face.

'You're an astonishing sight, you know,' he said, wagging his head in amusement. 'Look at yourself, Tressaille. What's the matter with you?'

'Matter with me? What?'

'You're all in rags. And your beard is singed. Very badly singed.'

The Centurion, visibly annoyed and embarrassed, felt for his chin and cheeks.

'Yes,' he said angrily. 'I fell into the fire. It's true. But it doesn't matter now.'

'Why? Where are your horses? And your hundred men?'

The Centurion dismissed the question with an angry gesture of his hand.

'I have them no more,' he answered, irritated. 'They're all dead, killed in the great Battle of Peira-Colonna. You see, I had to come home on foot. That's why it took me so long. But it doesn't matter any longer. Can I have a drink?'

'Certainly. There is still half a bottle. It's the last bottle in town. There aren't any more.'

'Let's finish it,' suggested the Centurion, now suddenly again in an almost affable mood. 'Afterwards I must go.'

Fortescue poured the single glass and pushed it over to the little man, who emptied it in one gulp. He filled it again.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Into the thick of the land,' answered the Centurion gravely.

‘As far as that?’

The Centurion nodded. ‘As far as that. And I’m not coming back. No, quite certainly, I’m not coming back. So if you want to keep my old house you can have it. I make you a present of it.’

Fortescue made a slight bow. ‘I’m grateful,’ he said.

‘Not at all. You’ve had it so long that it almost belongs to you. And then you gave me the bottle, didn’t you? I appreciated that.’

Fortescue shook his head. He looked at him inquiringly.

‘Bottle? I never gave you a bottle.’

‘Of course you did.’

‘I tell you I didn’t.’ Fortescue looked at him closely and sharply. Then he tugged his beard. ‘And about the house. I really don’t remember.’

He watched the Centurion with intense amusement. The old man was utterly perplexed. He put down the glass. He looked back sharply. His quick, bird-like eyes flickered ominously under their white, bushy, and slightly singed brows.

‘Do you know what I think?’ he asked at length.

‘No. But I’d like to know.’

‘I think you aren’t, perhaps, King Francis after all. Eh?’

His legs slightly apart, his arms akimbo, he watched Fortescue to see what effect this accusation was going to have on the man. But he was disappointed. Fortescue’s smile merely grew broader.

‘Of course I’m not. I told you so before. I never said I was King Francis. I’m an Englishman.’

He laughed. His laughter made the Centurion visibly more angry.

‘Englishman?’

Fortescue nodded. ‘Quite. There are still a few of us about in this country. Left over. From Agincourt, I suppose, or was it Crécy? I forget. It may also have been Chemin des Dames. I really don’t remember.’

He looked at him with a humble smile.

‘Rubbish!’ snarled the Centurion. ‘You and your stories. I’m glad I found you out, and just in time too. Don’t try to befuddle me again.’

He clasped his long-fingered, bony hand round the neck of the bottle that was standing before him on the table.

'Rubbish, I say,' he repeated. 'You've got no business in all this at all. You never belonged here. You smuggled yourself into this place. I wonder how you managed to deceive me? I should have known all along, from the moment you talked to me so crazily up in your bedroom.'

His voice had grown steadily louder and more angry.

'I don't know you at all!' he croaked.

'But I know you,' answered Fortescue in calm amusement.

'How can you?' demanded the exasperated man.

'I've read you. In a book. In fact, in several books.'

He watched the Centurion's face. It looked as if it were going to burst into a thousand fragments any moment.

'I've got them all down at the house,' he suggested. 'If you like we can go and look you up.'

But this was too much for the Master of the City.

'Ah!' he croaked, quite beside himself. 'You've cheated me! You've——'

Words failed him. In his infuriation he had gripped the empty wine bottle by its neck and swung it threateningly over his own and Fortescue's head.

'Ho, Tressaille!' the Englishman exclaimed. 'Careful! Look out what you're doing!'

But the infuriated knight did not hear him. The bottle swung around several times and finally crashed on the table top. Splinters flew in all directions. Fortescue sat up. He looked round.

'Oh, oh!' lamented a thin brittle voice somewhere. 'Oh, oh!'

'What's the matter?'

'Now I've broken my bottle! Oh, oh!'

Fortescue got up and looked round once more. He couldn't see anyone.

The Centurion had disappeared.

With his sleeve he brushed the glass splinters from the table top and went back to his house. He was suddenly very sleepy.

The morning mist had vanished; clear, cold autumn air came floating up the Bourgade from the mountains. Fortescue took a deep breath. The sun had risen above Vargelonnes. A riot of red and gold,

like molten metal, poured from the sky over the roofs of the old city and glittered and gleamed in a million reflections on its silent, lifeless windows.

He climbed the stairs to his upper room and stepped out on to his wooden balcony. He stretched his arms as if awakening this very moment from years of slumber. Unwittingly his elbow tore off a few shoots of ivy which had wandered all over the front of the house. Fortescue turned and, lifting their helpless, dangling fangs, tried to put them back in their old place, hoping they would cling again. But as he looked closely at the small bare patch of the wall which they had covered he discovered that it had not the dry, brittle, and many-cracked surface of old plaster but the smooth, hard face of solid stone. He pushed the clinging ivy back a little farther. Stone it was, indeed; a flat rectangular slab, sunk into the wall, peered out from beneath the thick green cluster.

Fortescue cleared away still more of the ivy. Now the stone emerged. He wiped its surface clean, first with the palm of his hand, then with his handkerchief. It took him a long time to make out the weirdly ornamental lettering that was chiselled into the stone. But finally it was clear.

To Commemorate the Night of July the Sixteenth in the Year Fifteen Hundred and Forty-nine When Francis the Third King of France to Await the Arrival of His Princely Cousins the Duke of Burgundy and Prince Gianfrancesco Grimaldi Lay in This My House Bertrand de Tressaille Sieur de Roquefort.

Fortescue looked at it for a long time, smiling, and finally covered the stone again with the ivy. He turned round and looked out towards the land. The sun was rising higher and higher. With a wide, sweeping embrace autumn rode forth in glistening freshness across the valleys and hills towards the invisible sea.

He closed his eyes for a moment against the blinding light. Time now strode on with outstretched arms across the plains and the forests, swelling the rivers, raising the crops, deadening the vineyards, crumpling the house and the stable that man and his daughters had built. The memory of time lives under the thick, clinging ivy. The

ashes under the overturned hearthstones are dead, but new fires are being kindled in the next valley. On the ridge of the hill the years pass each other as they come and go, and the hours walk no faster than the centuries.

LONDON, *Autumn*, 1942.

THE END

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